AMPHIBIA'S
GREATEST
TREASURES

foreword

Thank you for picking up Amphibia's Greatest Treasures! We're a zine focused on celebrating our fandom's greatest treasures: our fanfiction authors. You'll find a variety of different fics in this zine, including prosaic character analyses, canon divergent what-ifs, post-Amphibia character dynamic explorations, and much more.

Some authors have chosen to add in start notes and content warnings, so please heed those! You'll also find that artists have paired up with authors to create title pages and small, beautiful illustrations throughout the fics.

We had a lot of fun putting this zine together and we're proud to say that we are the first major Amphibia fandom zine to feature writers. We hope that you enjoy the zine.

Love,

The Amphibia's Greatest Treasures Zine Mod Team

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The first time Anne saw a frog after Amphibia she cried. For, like, a long time.

She had been by herself that afternoon, running an errand for her mom after school. The sun was setting and as she crossed the street she noticed it. Sitting still, quiet, hiding under a bush. A frog.

It startled her when she first saw it. She stopped in her tracks, a wave of feeling crossing her chest that she certainly had not been expecting.

She cried.

She had been trying hard, for weeks now, to keep herself calm over all of *this*. It was a hard, emotional time but she was the heart and that meant she had to keep herself together so she could keep everyone else together.

Never mind that she had died, been re-born. It was horrifying, yes, but right now she couldn't worry about that. Because while she had been cut off from a place that had meant so much to her that wasn't the end of it. They had *all* been cut off from a place that had meant so much to all of them. And they were all hurt, not just hurting. Marcy was in the hospital, going to therapy. And Sasha was scared and shaky and tentative with her feelings in a way that was new and jarring, even if it was for the greater good. And on top of *all of that* Marcy was moving soon and then they would be split up and—

It was a nightmare and she was tired but she had to hold it together. For them. Her parents. For Sasha. For Marcy.

They were all so scared, upset. Things were scary but she could hold them together. She would. The heart. It was her *job*.

Because of it, this role she felt she needed to fill, she hadn't been letting herself think about being stuck away from Amphibia. About Sprig, his smile, his energy, his gentle tenderness. About Polly, her snide comments. About Hop-Pop, his croaky laugh. About all of them, how much she missed them. About how much she missed all of Amphibia.

But—

She cried into the street at the sight of the frog, hurting so, so bad.

She loved Amphibia, her family from another world, so much and yet—

When she got home she was still crying, the frog cupped gently in her hands.

Her mom, startled, had held her tight, wiped the tears from her eyes and, reluctantly, called her dad to stop at the pet store on his way home for a terrarium.

It ended up being a California Tree frog. Anne was learning a lot about the frogs of Los Angeles these days.

She had bought a field guide and she read it as if it was a novel.

It stung; feeding Sprig 2, checking the book to compare him to the pictures within it, trying to figure out what he was. Each page she turned she felt a pull at her heart. A sting in her chest which sunk through her body, settled in the crevices and left her aching. But no matter how much it hurt, how much it made her weepy, left her feeling achy, she couldn't stop.

She was obsessed, in a way, *because* she was hurting. She had to look. She had to remember. She—

And for a while that was consistent. She was perpetually sad, perpetually hurting, and unable to stop looking.

But slowly the ache settled. Never leaving but finding its home, hidden deeper and deeper into the cracks of her emotions. Lingering but unobtrusive, secondary.

And soon she found that the more she looked, the more she flipped through her book, the more she fed Sprig 2, watched him sit in his terrarium, bask in the light or the water she had gotten for him, the more the hurt turned into not just that lingering, unavoidable feeling but something different**.** Something almost nice.

She felt that each little moment with her frog, feeding him, cleaning his space, making more elaborate enclosure designs for him, learning about what he was, his sibling species around town, was a way to honor what she had lost. She did it because she loved them, there. And soon, as time passed, the days turned to weeks turned to months, she found that the memory, the memories the frogs she caught around town, the one she kept in her bedroom, invoked, became less of a pain and more of a joy.

And, almost more importantly, soon all of it just became interesting, fun. She *liked* it, learning about these weird little creatures. And she wasn't even sure it was just because she missed Amphibia anymore.

So, she found herself taking pictures of Sprig 2 and heading off to the aquarium. She asked the staff in the herpetology room if she had identified him correctly and, when they said she had, she felt more accomplished than she had in ages.

She started bringing her field guide with her when she ran errands. She started listening, looking, taking blurry pictures of other frogs she found in the field, recording voice notes in her phone of the calls she heard by the water trying to figure out what species they were.

And eventually, slowly, it became easier.

Easier to deal with, the pain of having been torn away, of missing them, of feeling so out of place and upset but repressing it.

And easier, too, to identify them.

Pretty soon she could identify local frog species by no more than a glance, a good few characteristics. Could even differentiate between calls, in some cases. She started catching them on rainy evenings and foggy mornings. Started studying different species, salamanders and caecilians and snakes and lizards.

She spoke with the herpetologists at the aquarium regularly. Asked them questions about different species (What did they think about the *Ensatina eschscholtzii* debate? Did they have any western blind snakes? Was there somewhere for her to see California giant salamanders in the wild?), about physiology (Why do spadefoots have their spades? What are vestigial limbs for? How do mating calls work?) how they got their jobs and, eventually, just about their lives. She became, somewhat, friends with them. Somewhat, too, friends with the species she learned of.

And soon she was a budding teenager, growing lanky and tall and quickly labeled as ‘the weird frog girl’ by her peers. She didn’t mind one bit.

When Anne was picking schools to attend she was upset and flustered and anxious.

She had dropped, in her later high school years, a lot of her enthusiasm about herping. School had gotten busier and the worry of things past (Amphibia, losing touch with Sasha, what that might mean, where Marcy was, how they were doing) and things future (moving away from home, not knowing anyone, becoming god one day) was looming. So while she still loved it, loved herping and learning about her smaller friends, while she still had a snake of her own, a few frogs, a rambunctious pair of salamanders she cared for, she hadn’t ever considered it as something to pursue. Something to dedicate her life to. She honestly hadn’t ever really considered the fact that that was something she *could* do. Ironic, given her still close ties to many of the herpetologists at the aquarium.

Further ironic that *despite* her still close ties to many of the herpetologists at the aquarium it was *Sasha* who encouraged her to pursue it in the end.

They had been paired together in a senior seminar, an awkward and stilted encounter considering they hadn’t talked in months prior, and had drifted entirely into new social circles by then.

They were meant to discuss their college paths, practicalities of having jobs through college, their scholarship applications, housing applications, a hodgepodge number of things that the senior seminar instructor told them lazily in the morning before assigning groups.

They sat down stiffly next to each other and, after a moment of tense silence, Sasha explained she was going to school for psychology at UCLA in the fall and asked Anne what she was planning on doing. Anne had bashfully admitted she was undecided.

“Really?” Sasha had asked at once, the tense stillness dropping in an instant with a quip of her brow, “I assumed you were going into frog vet school or something,”

Anne laughed, shook her head, but couldn’t help but feel something click within her. A shift of that uneasy, panicky weight she had felt like she had been carrying inside of her for months.

Herpetology. That was a thing people could study, right? A job people had.

“No, really,” Sasha insisted when Anne didn’t answer, “I just can’t see you doing anything other than working with frogs, y'know. It's just so,” she paused, shrugging, “you,”

And Anne had to admit, even if she didn’t say it then, didn’t make any snappy decisions about it…she agreed.

She went home holding her head a little higher and, pulling her first field guide back out again, flipping through her old notes with a smile, she researched what it would be like to study herpetology, what she might do after, if that was what she decided. She felt, for the first time in ages, light.

She settled on Ecology and Evolutionary biology, since Herpetology wasn’t a major offered at her school but she took those few relevant classes she could. And, even better, she got a job in the herpetology lab on campus.

She couldn’t say she loved that job. It was a lot more dealing with dead things than she would have expected. She couldn’t say she loved the woman who ran the lab either, excitable and bouncy but much more interested in physiology, concerned with publishing, than Anne found ideal. And she couldn’t say that she was thrilled when she started and realized how little of her degree, how few of her classes, would actually be focused on herpetology. And, of course, classes had been a lot more depressing than she had been expecting. Chytrid fungus and climate change and habitat loss and all of that looming over her head, big and large and loud and scary.

But, the more she trickled through her degree, the more she pushed herself and persevered, the more she found that she did love what she was studying. Of course she loved all she learned about herps, her love for them growing with each presentation, research paper, class, lecture which focused on them. She loved working with them, savoring every moment she got to spend with live specimens.

But it wasn't only that, either. As time went on, as she continued with her job in the lab, kept moving into higher level courses, she found that she was starting to love it not just because of herps, but for all of it. Ecology, and plant biology, microbiology; things as big as global conservation and as little as the names of all the things in her yard and how all of it, big and small, kept moving. How all those other things interacted with herps, expanded beyond them, grew bigger than anything she had ever understood before. And, she found, that she loved it so much that she even loved the sad things. Because while they were sad, while they filled her with dread, it was good to know that she was trying to be on the side of making things better. That she was working on fixing the mess, helping what was still here.

And, in the end, after a lot of trials and tribulations, a new and invigorated love for her own planet, she found that she was going back to the aquarium. But this time with a degree, a *job*.

Working at the aquarium ended up being a lot less fun than visiting it but she found that, despite the hard work of it, despite the long hours, the not-so-great pay (especially considering how much her *degree* had cost), despite the fact that she had to deal with a lot of stupidity, a lot of exhaustion, she was happier there than she had been in a long time.

She got to work with frogs all day, heading the daily background prep; feedings and cleanings and breeding programs and all of the hidden tasks which came with caring for animals. She liked organizing it all, the technicalities of making sure everything was fed, taken care of. She liked the gratification of seeing things work, a tweak she made in a diet or an enclosure leading to more activity, a better well being.

And she got to teach too. Which, in its own way, was exhausting, but at the same time, lovely. Because for every bad student, the disinterested, rude, she would find one who was simply fascinated. The oddball student who hung on her every word, asked questions genuinely, looked with more than just empty curiosity, who looked like it *meant* something. Capturing that, focusing on it, encouraging it, was so exciting, so big, fulfilling that she would take any number of kids who would puke on their own shoes.

Because there was so much work to do, so much to change, so much to save, and she needed those kids; those few who were curious, wanted to help. And also, maybe a little more selfishly, because they reminded her of herself.

Especially because soon she was finding that she had her own frog girl on her hands. A young girl, only a little younger than Anne had been when she had started asking questions, who came in asking about the different species she had been seeing in her neighborhood, what made them different, which ones were endangered, which ones were native, how Anne got into herping.

Anne decided not to tell her the full story, not really, but she gave as much as she figured she could without raising eyebrows.

She told stories of finding frogs in the park, of finding some of her best friends in frogs, and about how she fumbled her way into herpetology.

And she found, with a sudden, stark, vaguely painful surprise, that it was the first time she had thought about Amphibia in a long while.

It crashed into her like a wave, a tingle along her spin, across her skin.

She missed them so much.

She missed the chaos of it; running from giant bugs, tackling toads, wielding a sword. She missed feeling that rush of giggly, bubbly adrenaline after winning, escaping. The peace which came with ending her day in the basement, smelling of mildew and swamp water in the best possible way. She missed the peaceful in between; helping on the farm, carrying buckets of produce to and from the market, laying in the sun, listening to the rustle of wind through the grass, the symphony of insects all around. She missed the freeness of it all; busy and constantly in danger and wanting to go home yet separated from the stress of here. Nothing to do but pitch in a bit, enjoy the world around her, breathe in the air which was free of car exhaust.

And, of course, more than any of that she missed *them*. Polly. Hop Pop. Everyone in the town. But, mostly, she missed Sprig.

She missed the handshakes and the laughter and the way things just felt so right, regular with him. She missed the way they clicked; such a great team despite not knowing each other for long, despite being different species from different worlds.

She missed being his older sister, his best friend, someone to show the way while also making room to cause chaos with. She missed how comfortable she was around him; completely herself in a way she had never been before, had sometimes struggled with since.

She missed the little moments with all of them; catching Polly moments before she was going to jump on her head to scare her, Hop Pop lecturing her for any number of small things, Sprig laughing at her over no more than a properly timed glance in his direction.

It made her weepy as it all came back. As she worked, smelling that old smell, damp and moist and objectively kind of gross but so pleasantly nostalgic, she grew sniffily. As she worked, feeding toads who looked too familiar, frogs who she had found herself particularly attached to, she felt her eyes grow damp. And when one of the tadpoles she raised turned out hot pink and particularly social, she had full blown cried.

And as she started to remember, letting herself think about how much she missed them all for the first time in far too long, she found that same old feeling she had had when she was younger coming back to her. The ache, the sad burn of missing them, which translated so wonderfully into something else. Something new, better. A passion for this, for the work she did, for the world she had here and all the kids who, like her, found comfort in those slimy, overlooked creatures.

So she was glad. So glad she almost cried on the poor girl who had been asking her, simply and sweetly, about how she got into working here, the first time it hit her.

But, waving it away, she kept on. She laughed her way through it, happy and sad all at once, and encouraged the questions, allowed her to cycle through old debates, questions she had long given up on, and felt so boldly, dramatically happy, *proud* that she almost couldn't stand it.

She took her into the back, let her help feed different animals, watched with pride as she shrieked in startled joy when she handled snakes, salamanders, frogs. She encouraged her to study zoology, herpetology; to pursue this passion which she herself had.

And as she watched, helped her grow into her love, she felt like a big sister again.

warnings for:

major character death

∞

The afterlife is a tiny floating cottage.

Anne stares at the house—it's adorable, tiny pond and garden, autumnal trees, white plaster and red roofing, the yellow glow of the lamplight from the windows warm and inviting. It wouldn't look too out of place in Wartwood, she thinks, but it's a little too modern. It's way too old-fashioned for Los Angeles, though. She realizes she's suspended in space, constellations dotting the sky all the way around the tiny chunk of land she stands on.

She hesitates.

She's dead. A millisecond ago she was fighting Andrias—he'd thrown Sprig to his death—Marcy had a flaming sword buried in her chest. (A terrible warmth creeps up her throat, lodged there like she'd swallowed a leaf whole, and she tries not to think of blue flames and her hands crumbling into ash).

And now she's here. She's *dead.*

Her eyes dart back and forth, panic crashing over her like a cold wave. Where are—*no. No.* They're not here. Marcy and Sprig aren't here. They're alive, not here in the afterlife with her. So they're not dead. But she is.

(Overwhelmingly, creeping at the back of her mind, like some kind of parasite, is the sense that she is not supposed to be here).

Anne turns the front door's handle—what else is she supposed to do?—and crawls through.

Plants line the walls, alongside gilded-framed pictures of her family and friends, each one smiling down at her. (It's a little uncanny to see Sprig and Marcy smiling at her. It's a little surreal to finally see her parents' faces again, after all this time). A cozy fireplace is nestled in the back corner. The whole room is lit with a single lightbulb, shaded in a dragonfly-patterned stained-glass cover, supplemented by glow-in-the-dark stars and mushrooms lining the ceiling.

The afterlife is home.

In the center of the room is a clunky 90's analog computer. (Vaguely, she's reminded of being a child, no older than six or seven, propped up by pillows sitting on her dad's giant swivel chair and leaning over the wooden desk to slot a CD into her dad's old computer).

3_STONES_DEITY would like to chat.

Anne clicks **ACCEPT** like she's done this a thousand times before. (It's a little too easy).

***3_STONES_DEITY*:**
Hello Anne 0.o

Anne squints. Deity? Three stones? Like the gemstones?

***ANN3_BCH07*:**
Hi, who are you?
What's going on?

To Anne's surprise, the response is near-immediate. (Do deities need to type?)

***3_STONES_DEITY*:**
To be honest, I am not sure either. :(
I am the cosmic guardian who has watched over countless worlds for countless eons…
I think something went wrong, and your time on Earth was cut short.
Would you like to try again? :)

Just like before, little **ACCEPT** and **DECLINE** boxes pop up. Anne stares at them for a moment, mouse hovering over the accept button. *Went wrong. Cut short. Try again.* She bites down on her tongue, feeling nothing.

The decision takes little thought. She's found, over and over again, that the only thing she can do is try.

She takes a breath in and clicks **ACCEPT.**

It's faster the second time.

A wave of recognition washes over her as she takes the sight in—floating chunk of land in space, tiny cottage, cute pond. She ducks under the doorframe and steps inside.

(It's a little easier to remember this time, oddly—she can still feel the adrenaline, the almost-primal urge to protect her friends. She'd punched that robot square in its face, her hands illuminated in blue light that crept up her arms and swallowed her whole in a split-second blink. And now she was here. It was as simple as that).

The inside of the house is the same as the last time. She sits down at the computer cross-legged as a message pops up on the screen.

***3_STONES_DEITY*:**
*Hello again, Anne ^_^*

***ANN3_BCH07*:**
Hi, uh, Cosmic Guardian?
Weird question, why are you talking to me with this old timey computer?

***3_STONES_DEITY*:**
Old? Are you human teens using something else these days?

***ANN3_BCH07*:**
Yeah, you're off by a couple decades :)

***3_STONES_DEITY*:**
Well, perhaps we should try a different form...

The screen flashes white, then the whole computer, and—

Anne blinks, and the computer is a cat, black with white markings, a little too familiar. "Better?" they ask, mouth not moving.

Her fingers twitch, resisting the urge to scoop them up. "Better," she agrees. She opens her mouth. It's on the tip of her tongue, and in her heart she knows it's true, but she can't bring herself to ask it.

"You are, in fact, dead," the being—the Deity, or the Cosmic Guardian, or *whatever*—says (doesn't say?), nodding their tiny cat head like they can read her mind. "I made a copy of you right before you expired, both now and the first time. Backups, if you will. And then I put you back. For all intents and purposes, you're the same Anne Boonchuy."

Anne can't bring herself to feel anything. "And you're a...deity of some kind? Who looks like my cat?"

"Just a watcher. My true form would make your human brain explode."

Anne laughs humorlessly. "Well. I'd rather not die a third time."

The Guardian nods. "I have a long story to tell you later," they say, licking their paws, "but for now know that I am the creator of the Calamity Gems, and their power seems to have gotten away from me. A little bit."

"Away from you? How?"

"Well, you're here, aren't you?" they ask.

"What—" Anne swallows, and it's like twigs and dead leaves are stuck in her throat. "What do you mean?"

"I wanted you to *use* the gems' powers, not *die* every time you use them."

It's like a knife to her chest. "Use them? I don't even know—I don't know what I did! All I know is I was trying to protect my friends—My family! You can't tell me not to do that!"

"I know," they say. "That's what worries me."

"So I'll just—keep dying, then?" Her eyes sting, heat gathering in her throat and in her chest.

"Probably," the cat says, and they shrug, impossibly, their tone far too impartial for Anne's liking. "It's very strange. Even now I can feel their power tugging away at you, trying to take you away from me."

"Aren't you, like, a god?" Anne asks, crouching down to look the cat Guardian in the eyes. "You said you created those gems. If this isn't supposed to be happening, just send me back again. Problem solved!"

"Okay," they say, "but heed my warning: it will get *worse*. Can you accept that?"

"I accept," she says, and she's gone.

She should know what comes next. She sure sees *it* this time, feels the powers activate. And yet, somehow, she doesn't know it's coming.

Sparks of blue light and flame course through her veins as she kicks the robot into space, her whole body ablaze. She turns back to look at her parents' faces, a smile on her face, knowing they were safe now, that they saw what she had accomplished—

And the cat is staring up at her.

"Welcome back," they say. "I warned you."

"I know," she says, sitting down, legs splayed out on the wooden floor. She hadn't remembered, she realized. She hadn't remembered this place (she wouldn't have—well. She still would. This much she knows).

She needs to ask. She needs to ask, but the words are stuck. *Start small, Anne.* "Am I gonna come back here every time?"

"Probably." The Guardian follows suit, stretching their little paws out and lying down.

She looks around, as if she would find some new detail that would explain everything. A moment passes, silent except for the crackling of the fireplace and the cat's nearly silent purring. She taps her sneakers against the floor, once, twice, and watches as the cat starts grooming their paws.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spots a gold-framed photo of Sasha and Marcy, smiling as if they're mid-laughter. "Does this place ever change? Like, new pictures, or a coat of paint?"

"Probably not."

"Hey, aren't you all-knowing? How come you don't know for sure?"

"I told you. I'm not all-knowing. I just watch."

"But you made the gems, though."

The cat sits up and tilts their head. "And you made a turkey-hand when you were in the first grade. Does that make you all-knowing, too?"

"No." She picks at her shoelaces. *Not a god. Just a creature.* "Hey, how do I know I haven't been dead this whole time? Like, when you made that first copy of me. Is anything after that even real? Because I didn't remember I came here until I—"

"Was here? I know."

"I'd like to remember."

The Guardian shakes their head. "I can't do that. You're not really *you*, right now." They stand up suddenly. "I need to send you back."

"Wait—you can't—" She looks down, and her arms are already fading. "I have more questions! You can't—"

"Goodbye, Anne."

They're all going to die—her heart leaps out of her chest and into her eyes and hands—and the portal opens. The portal *opens!* They can go back! She's running, running towards it, thinking of the world she left behind—

She trips on a small black-and-white cat.

"Where am I?!"

"Oh," she says, registering where she is. "You. Here."

"Yes," the Guardian says. "Try to avoid trampling me next time." They're unbothered, impartial, as always. If Anne wasn't so—so *caught up* in all of it, so dependent on this creature for answers, it would make her blood boil.

"Are they safe?" she asks, frantically, "Sprig and Polly and Hop Pop? Did they make it through?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you."

Anne squints. *Hard.*

"Well. I suppose I am going to send you back anyway," they say. "Yes, they're safe."

The relief only lasts a split second. "Hey!" she shouts, crouching down and scooping the Guardian up, shaking them. "Why'd you send me back so fast last time?"

The Guardian warps—a blink of white light, like before, with the computer—and suddenly they're on the ground again. "I told you. The gems have some kind of hold on you—your consciousness, if you will, and are pulling on it. And I can feel its power growing. Our time together will get shorter and shorter."

"*Shorter?!* But you made the—oh. Wait." She scuffs her shoe against the ground. "I know, I know, hand turkey. Never mind."

The cat nods. "Hand turkey."

"Wait! Before you send me back, can't you at least let me remember?" she pleads, crouching down to be on eye level with the creature. "Because this keeps happening, and there's no way dying this many times is good for my—y'know, *being alive.*"

"That scares me too," they say, simply. "Right now, you are a copy of a copy of a copy." They sigh. "Our time is out again. You accepted this, Anne."

I guess I did, she realizes, and she's gone.

"Oh, I–" she looks down at her hands. At the house. At the cat. "I did it! I...I got Andrias! I saved the day!"

"No," the cat says.

"I can't believe I actually did that. It was so *awesome*!" she says, smiling from the memory, not hearing the Guardian's words. "I took him down *so fast,* I think I'm finally gaining control of my..." She blinks, and blue floods her body like a thousand pinpricks as in mere seconds, she bisects the tyrant straight through his chest. *Oh.* She'd just...let it take over, like a black hole, like a caged animal, like lightning in a jar. Let it eviscerate her insides, peel away at the particles of her body until she was nothing. Let it get *out.*

It had to stop.

"That was it," she says, with some kind of finality. "That was the last time. I beat the bad guy. I'm dead for real now. Right?"

"No," the cat says, again.

"*No?!* What do you mean, no? As in, I didn't beat the bad guy? Or I'm not dead yet?"

"No."

"It's not *either* of those?!"

The Guardian blinks.

She looks down, and—she's fading. Already, already she's *fading*–

"See you later, Anne."

She was always going to die this way.

When she wakes, she brushes ashes off her shirt. She sits up, scoops up the cat, and walks out of the cottage and into the void.

"*I'm asking!*" She shouts into the darkness, clutching the Guardian close to her heart like they're some kind of simple creature, because simple creatures are all that's left now. "You helped me save the world. This was always going to be the end. I accepted that. And maybe it's selfish to ask for something else, but the Guardian can't help, and you said all I had to do was ask. So I'm asking you for just one last thing. *Let me rest.* Please."

The void does not move.

There is no answer.

The Guardian nuzzles their face into her arms, and– there's no answer, just simple creatures, and she sinks her knees into the grass, into the flowers.

"Let me stay," she whispers, as she watches her body turn to ash again. "I don't care where. *Let me stay.*"

She wakes again.

"I wanted you to take over for me, you know," the Guardian says. "To be the next Guardian."

"Why?"

"Because you were the only human who used the calamity power for good."

"I wouldn't want that anyway," she shakes her head. "To be a Guardian."

"I'm very tired," the Guardian says.

"Me, too." She sighs. "Maybe eventually. I'm just a kid. But now, who *knows* if that's gonna happen, because—"

"I'm sorry."

She's fading again. "I was only in Amphibia for maybe twenty minutes, that time. I don't know what happened. I think I said goodbye? Man. I want to take a nap."

She is, ostensibly, dead.

The cat doesn't say anything, they just jump into her lap and curl up. Half-dead, then. Or dreaming. She feels– *something*, her heart hammers loudly in her ears even now, even when her skin's half-ash, half-alight by blue flame.

But she runs her fingers through the Guardian's fur and they go right through, and for the first time, the word *ghost* crosses her mind. She can't feel anything.

Her head's fuzzy. Her body blurs blue.

Someone's strung her up through space like the lights on her bedroom wall. But she's awake.

"I'm *alive*," she says to the cat instead—absurdly, because she is anything but.

"You accepted this," The Guardian says.

She grasps at lucidity. Everything is blue. Everything is hazy.

"I did," she agrees.

"How long has it been? What's my name?"

There is no answer. The cat is gone.

Blue, like the void, like her body.

There is nothing left.

There is nothing.

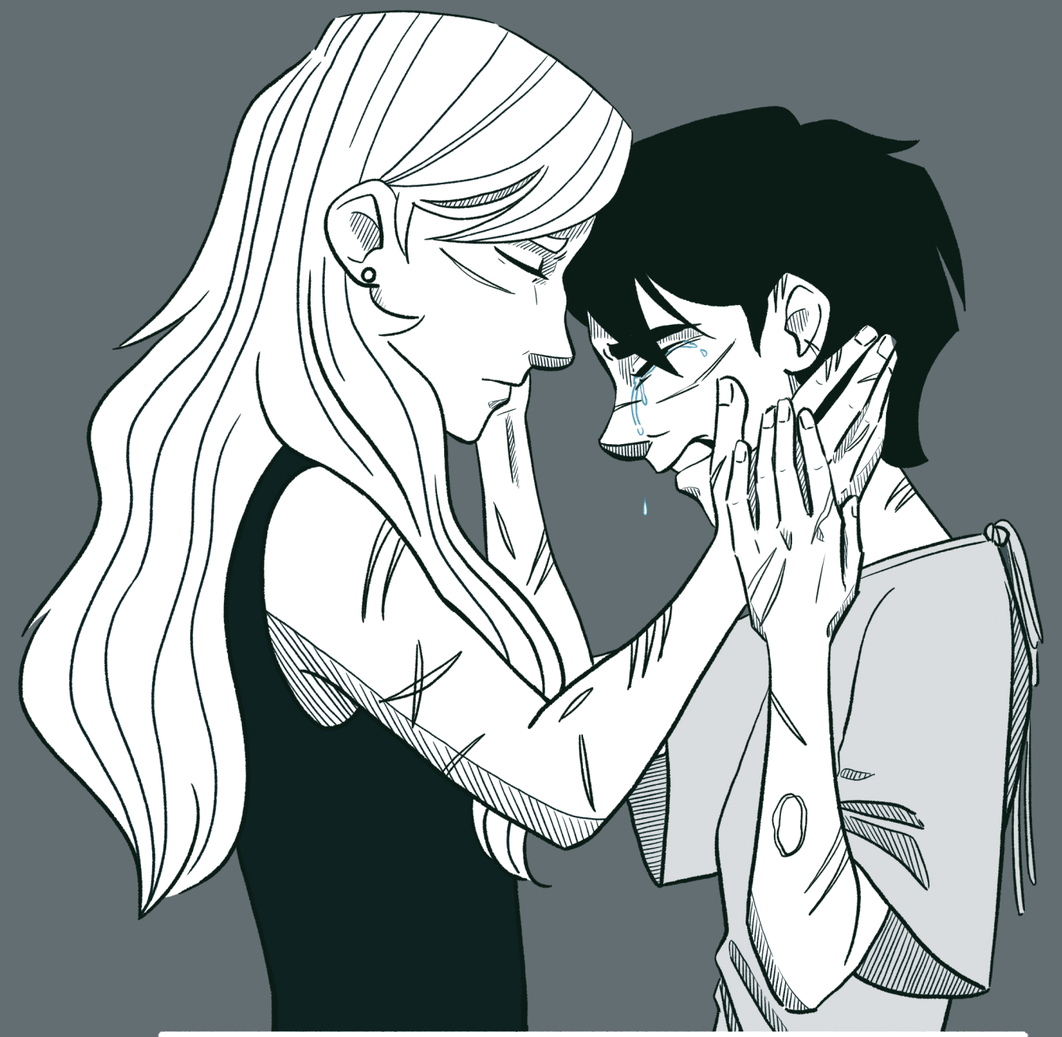
She accepted this.

Like leaves.

Acceptance.

Written by: Clo

i miss you,



i'm sorry

Title page and spot art: Kami

Sasha knows something is wrong before Marcy even does.

With her dysfunctional family of sorts, Sasha grew up to become quick to recognize the signs of a *fucking liar.* Andrias is staring down at Marcy, a malicious glint in his eyes. Marcy's bouncing on the balls of her feet, looking unabashedly hopeful.

Anne's the one holding the box, and Marcy is hovering over her shoulder like a helicopter, gaze squarely focused on the music box.

This isn't right.

Sasha tries begging. "Please, Anne, don't give it to him." She's desperate. Anne knows that Sasha isn't the type to beg for things.

Anne gives her a blank stare, and Sasha tries to ignore the way her blood goes cold with that expression. It's like she never knew Anne at all—maybe she didn't.

Of course, Anne—sweet, unassuming Anne—gives it to him.

Sasha feels the cesspool of fear and guilt that claws at her insides, sticky and tar-like and too ugly to ever see the light of day.

Anne is quick to realize her mistake as soon as Andrias starts talking, but she's too late. "Something's wrong here," she mutters, and Sasha shoots her a glance as she steps back.

The box glows, the castle floats. Sasha's grip on the hilt of her sword gets tighter. Her knuckles hurt with the force she's holding onto it with.

"Andrias, *stop.* This wasn't the plan! You said no one would get hurt!" Marcy pleads. She stands in front of him, making brief eye contact with Sasha before turning back to Andrias. In that split second, she sees right through Marcy.

"Mar-Mar, what plan?" Anne asks.

"Yeah, what plan?" Sasha's anger seeps into her words, and she doesn't try to hide it. The hurt is so blatantly obvious, and the anger of this betrayal is written all over her face.

Marcy starts talking, but Sasha hears nothing between her ears but buzzing white noise. She barely registers the anguish on Marcy's face.

She snaps back when Andrias says that it was on purpose. *Marcy did this on purpose—she did this on fucking purpose,* Sasha thinks, outraged.

"You've got to be kidding me."

Were her and Anne's lives a game to Marcy?

She tries to explain. Sasha doesn't want to listen.

"The three of us could be friends, *forever!* Together!" Marcy cries.

Sasha is, by no means, a saint. Far from it.

But she takes a step back in disgust—or maybe it's shock. She wouldn't know, because her brain is muddled and confused from it all.

Marcy's wearing a nervous smile and tears threaten to fall from her eyes. Her gaze flits to Sasha, who can do nothing but look away.

What the fuck?

Sasha digs her fingernails into her palm. The skin under her fingernails are marked with crescent moon tears, bleeding ever so slightly.

It feels like a fever dream, this whole shitshow—

—but it doesn't take long before Marcy's bleeding out on the floor, Anne is gone, and Grime is ushering Sasha out of the castle with guilt in tow.

And it's very much real.

Sasha stands at the door, staring it down with such aggression that it would have scared anyone in the near vicinity off. Her hand is on the handle, shaking slightly.

Sasha gingerly pushes the door open, steeping in before swinging it shut behind her.

There's Marcy's bed, right in front of her, and the stickered wheelchair by her bedside.

"You're supposed to be asleep," Sasha reprimands, her words lacking any bite when she sees the reflection of the dim light in Marcy's eyes.

Marcy's sitting up, propped up against the backing of the gurney with her turned-off Nintendo Switch in her lap. She purses her lips. "I couldn't sleep."

Sasha looks at Marcy, who looks painfully tiny compared to the pale blue hospital gown. It doesn't reveal her gaunt figure in the same way that her former ranger outfit did, but Sasha still worries.

Sasha just stands there, a little lost on what to do. This is the first time that she and Marcy have been alone, just the two of them, since Amphibia.

Just to say something, to break the silence that keeps stretching on with every second, Sasha blurts: "You look . . ." Sasha pauses, before bluntly saying, "awful." And Sasha's not calling Marcy ugly—she's far from it, in fact. But her figure is sickly and the dark purple eye bags that stick out from the rest of her tan complexion speak for themselves.

Why would you say that why would you say that why would you say that—

Marcy exhales through her mouth, a long drawn sigh. "My mom's been telling me that too," she says drily, with a slight lilt to her voice that's almost a laugh.

Sasha swallows thickly. In her head, there were so many things she had wanted to say that she felt she couldn't, at least, not with Anne around. But Sasha's here now, and the words die in her throat. She's just standing there, like an absolute fucking idiot—*God, Waybright, could you really not do better?*

Marcy tilts her head and analyzes Sasha, surveying her. "What're you doing here?" she asks, and the question in itself stings, especially when Marcy adds, "Anne isn't—she isn't here." Marcy's voice wavers, like saying it hurts her, but her set jaw doesn't reveal much of what she's feeling.

Sasha tries not to let that get to her. "We're friends, right?" she tries weakly, adding a limp hand gesture for effect. She's sure the smile on her face doesn't meet her eyes. "Friends can visit friends," Sasha finishes lamely.

"Yeah, but—" *It's never been just us two.* The words go unsaid, and Marcy doesn't finish the sentence. Sasha thinks that's probably for the better.

"I just . . ." Sasha starts lamely, fidgeting with her hands. "I missed you, okay?"

There. It's like ripping a band-aid off, and it's scary to admit that to Marcy, that she misses her—needs *her.* "I—" Sasha's voice cracks. "I really, really missed you."

Sasha misses her, though Marcy is right there, she's *been* right there. But Sasha doesn't know how to articulate the kind of ache in her chest that keeps her up at night. Maybe it's more guilt than anything else, or the lack of a tangible apology that Sasha doesn't have.

"Oh," Marcy says, mouth slightly agape. Marcy blinks owlishly. She opens and closes her mouth like a fish, grasping for words other than *um* and *uh.* "I thought you were just tolerating me because of Anne." Sasha doesn't have the gall to say anything because though Marcy is far from the truth, Sasha isn't surprised she's left that impression on her.

"God, Marcy," Sasha whispers, voice hoarse. The shame lingers in her voice and rolls off of her in waves.

All she feels are the charred remains of regret, leaving a hollow pit in her stomach because *how could she have ever done something like that?* The fire is gone, doused out many moons ago, but the guilt is going to eat her alive like a fucking termite. Sasha feels the buildup of a lump in her throat and hopes that Marcy can't see it.

"I'm sorry." *I really am.*

It feels like everything was all for nothing, because Sasha is sure she can't fix this one—Marcy isn't Anne, and Sasha is a failure with nothing to show for all her scars. There's nothing that will make it alright because they'll both never be okay again.

The graying linoleum, the whirring of the fan, the smell of the bleach.

"I can go, if you want," Sasha offers.

The open wound, the yearning too big for her own body, the life half-lived.

"Don't go," Marcy shakes her head. She shifts slightly on the bed and places the Switch on the bedside, jerkily gesturing to the empty space beside her. Sasha hesitates, and as she does, she sees the fear flash in Marcy's eyes. Sasha sits on the edge of the bed before kicking off her shoes and lying down next to Marcy with her heart in her throat.

Sasha's hand instinctively reaches out for Marcy's, fingertips brushing Marcy's skin—it's Sasha's way of asking *is this okay? Are we okay?*

Marcy's fingers intertwine with Sasha's, and her hand is cold and her fingernails are short, stubby little things, but Sasha likes the way it feels in her bigger palm.

I want you, Sasha thinks, *and I'll wait like a dog at your door if you'll have me.*

"I'm sorry for making you think I didn't want you here," Marcy breathes, one hand in Sasha's and the other tracing the thin scar lines that litter Sasha's arms.

You fucking angel, you goddamn saint, and Sasha's heart swells with love.

"I'm sorry for making you think I didn't want you at all." The words open up an old wound, dirtying and infected and the skin is breaking apart to reveal this ugly mess of a thing that Sasha lets Marcy see. She's splitting her skull open, allowing her brain to be picked by Marcy's obsidian eyes.

(This apology is years overdue, and it doesn't begin to summarize just how sorry Sasha really is for what she's done, but it'd have to do.)

There's solace in the momentary silence, where love and regret and shame fills the room's empty corners taking up space.

"I don't blame you for that. I get it."

Sasha jolts up abruptly, so fast that Marcy flinches. "No, you don't have to get it, Marce. I was an awful person, and I totally fucked you and Anne over with my actions—"

"—I took you away from your lives," Marcy interrupts. "And God, Sash, I think about it all the time, and it doesn't fix what I did to you, but I'm—"

"*Marcy.*" Marcy pauses. "I get why you did it." *Inhale, exhale.* "You didn't want to be alone."

Neither did I. (Sasha is not big or brave enough to say it, but she will be, someday.)

They're silent for a moment. Sasha traces the scars that litter Marcy's arms, the ones that make her uniquely human. The ones that make her Sasha's Marcy.

Marcy leans into the touch.

"I'm trying, Sasha," Marcy's voice breaks. "I want to be good enough for you. For Anne." The sincerity is nauseatingly overwhelming, and the words tumble out of her mouth before she can stop them. "It's killing me, and I don't know how to make you hate me any less."

"I never hated you." The earnestness is sickening. "I was so *angry*, at first. But I don't hate you—I *could* never hate you."

Marcy dares to glance at Sasha. She scoffs. "You should."

Sasha snorts. "Are you trying to convince me to hate you? Because it's not working."

Marcy half shrugs, barely moving her shoulders. "I don't want to lose you. And I dunno, I thought it'd be easier to let go if you had already let go of me."

"You're not going to lose me," Sasha assures, and her words are almost convincing enough to be true, with the valence she delivers them with.

"I won't be able to stop it this time."

"I know."

Sasha cups Marcy's cheek ever so gently and presses her forehead against Marcy's. "You're so brave."

Marcy looks away, but Sasha sees her body shake with a sob. "I don't feel brave. Just stupid. Y'know, for how it all went down?" She laughs wetly. "'S okay, Sashy. You can say it."

"I mean it." And she does. Sasha feels seven years old again, open and raw like a wound, like a little girl who had friends who loved her more than her parents ever did. "I mean it, Marcy," she repeats, her voice rasping down to something a little more broken and low. "I'm proud of you."

And in that moment, Sasha knows that any anger she used to harbor towards Marcy has truly dissipated, because there's no more fire that burns white hot in her chest when she thinks about those actions, only sorrow. There's nothing left but a hole in her heart that is slowly mending with time.

"Thank you."

Marcy closes her eyes, arms loosely wrapped around Sasha in an embrace. Sasha feels Marcy's beating heart, the goosebumps on her arms, the rise and fall of her chest as she breathes. She wants to hold Marcy in her arms forever and a day. If she could've, she would have.

I'll never let you go again.

a light for dead men

written by blair
title page and spot art by jackdaw

a note from the author

While this fic is a relatively self-contained piece, there are plans for more that will likely go up when this is posted to AO3.

Given Barrel *and* the living toads are a significant part of this fic/series, frequently pre- vs post-caste implementation society crops up (the focus is on toads since that's who we see the most of, but there's lots of thought put into frog/newt circumstances and timelines as well). Toad social structure operates in large clans—and I mean *large*, some of them up to the thousands of members—and were traditionally a nomadic society. Keyword being "traditionally"—like a lot of traditions/culture/history/practices after installing a heavily enforced species-based caste system, toadish pastoralism and nomadic structure are *much* sparser; this is also in part due to the heavily militarized (not martial—there *is* a difference, and toads have always been a *very* martial society) modern population.

Given their social structure and what traditions remain, Sasha (who is considered an orphan even if her parents are still alive, since they're not exactly around, and she's clanless and thus functionally nameless) claiming a seriously important clan heirloom but *not* adopting herself into the Farlowe clan—Barrel's clan—is kind of a faux pas, not that she knows it. So some folks are a bit suspicious of her, while she's in the weird limbo of 'socially and culturally considered as a toad', but not *legally* considered a toad, yet. Toads as a whole aren't huge on longform, detailed laws and clauses, but what they *do* have, they tend to stick with pretty hard.

∞

Despite tying herself to what was essentially a runaway train about to kill her and half the toad clans gathered at North Tower, Sasha prided herself in having the self-respect to keep all her panicked screaming *internal*.

Cracked leather creaked beneath her hands as Sasha pulled at the wedged-in hammer even *harder*, feeding rage and desperation into the war-pink fire in her blood and behind her eyes and in the warhammer's runes—

Until sparks fireworked in her skull, and she almost lost her grip on the hammer.

< Holy—oh sweet spirits we're gonna *die*, turn it on, turn it on, turn it on the button is right *there* you weird mammal! >

Muscle memory forced Sasha's fingers into a depression along the rune-carven hilt, like she had a thousand times before. Weirdest adrenaline rush she'd *ever* felt, but there was no space in her mind to be grateful, drowned out by her own incoherent bonfire of panicked thoughts as North Tower loomed way too close, *way* too fast—!

"Behind the horn! Soft spot in its skull!" Grime bellowed from where he struggled to haul Percy and Braddock to relative safety.

Well, as safe as a rampaging narwhal-worm's back could be.

No time to respond, no time to even *think*. Sasha hauled the hammer over her head, the blaze of pink from its runes shading her vision like a sunrise, and activated the boosters she didn't even know were *there* just a second ago.

Bone and scale splintered beneath the owl-faced hammer head, and the narwhal-worm crashed to the ground—then *kept going*, digging a furrow into the swampy earth like the world's largest, angriest plow.

Uh-oh. "Hang on tight!"

The world shuddered, and then *exploded* around Sasha, throwing her into the horn she'd been clinging to as an anchor and driving the breath out of her.

Ears ringing, dust in her throat, eyes burning as if she'd stared at the sun, Sasha's heart thundered in her ears as she laid there like a window-stunned sparrow.

< *Ooh*, I'd forgotten how much it hurt to be alive...>

"Sasha," Grime rumbled from beside her—when did he get here? "Get up, I'll help you—we can get you seen by the medics for a concussion, but you *cannot* leave without presenting the warhammer."

Crud, right, otherwise it would delegitimize the success of her kill, *and* of her trophy. "Y—yeah, thanks, Grimesy."

Leaning heavily on Grime, Sasha grabbed the warhammer, its head dragging behind her as she lurched to the crown of the worm's skull.

Unceremoniously, for once uncaring of all the eyes on her, she swung the hammer

and dropped it right at the council's feet. "There's your hammer, idiots."

And then immediately staggered, passing out right off of the stupid worm's head.

At least Grime was fast enough to catch her, like he always was.

✨ ✨

Sasha blinked awake, bleary and sluggish, to the sight of North Tower's infirmary ceiling.

Her first thought was < Ouch, that's gonna sting. >

Her second thought was *Wait, that is* not *my voice*.

Sasha tensed, fingering the knife still strapped to her side.

Lurched upright, unsheathed blade in hand, to face—

"What the *he*—are you some kind of ghost?" Sasha sputtered, waving her knife through the transparent toad, who looked so unconcerned at the weapon swiping through his midsection that Sasha almost felt offended.

< Yeah, actually, > the...ghost, apparently? After encountering that swamp-witch of Grime's clan, ghosts weren't even *near* the weirdest supernatural thing Sasha'd seen in Amphibia—shrugged. < Been in and out of it for the past thousand years or so, but there wasn't much to see from a narwhal-worm's head. Not very adventurous animals. >

"...I *knew* Aldo's clan was messing with necromancy." There was no *way* the old coot wasn't actually dead.

< Uh, who? >

"The guy whose tower we're in? Current Northlord—wait, no, not important." Sasha shook her head—and immediately regretted it, ow, concussion, *ow*. "Better question. Who the heck are *you?*"

< You have my hammer, that should matter more than my name, being dead and all that. >

"...*You're* Barrel the Brave?" Sasha guessed, wishing she'd paid more attention to Grime's kooky ghost stories. Weren't single ghosts that *weren't* attached to a mass-grave cairn supposed to be more messed up? "So, what, you're haunting your old weapon?"

< Eh, sort of? > Barrel tilted his flattened palm. < I *was*, but now it looks like I'm haunting, uh, you, after you pulled it out. Why *did* you need it, anyway? >

Blithely, Sasha detailed their conquest—Barrel was a *toad*, surely he'd be on board.

The moment she explained Andrias's planned fate, Barrel lit up in blood-bright, protective outrage.

The wash of Barrel's indignation echoed migraine-heavy in her brain; though Sasha forced her expression into a familiar disdainful sneer at his flailing, it actually *stung* a bit. The vice-grip pressure popped and sparked behind her eyelids, like the pink adrenaline that pulled her hands to the Hammer's activation buttons but *way* worse.

Wait a second. "Hey, stay *out* of my head!" Sasha hissed through the burning headache, countless sleepovers watching scary movies bringing to mind ghostly possession and haunted minds.

< ...Ow, > Barrel echoed her thoughts while rubbing at his head, which hung in defeat. < Sheesh, kid, that's a heck of a sharp affinity for Calamity magic. How have the Night Guard not snapped you up as a recruit yet? >

Before Sasha could interrogate him further, because an affinity for *what*, Grime cracked open the door to let himself in.

"I see you're awake. How's your head, Sasha? Dizziness, pain, any other symptoms?" Grime asked—his voice lake-calm, but Sasha could tell he was still fretting. *Softie*.

"Just a headache, but not as bad as it used to be. That's it, though." Sasha squinted through the red fog of Barrel blocking her way. "Unless you count the ghost who won't leave me alone. Seriously, you could have *told* me the damn hammer was haunted."

"The *what*?" Grime rushed to her cot, grabbing the oil lamp and raising it above them to look at her…shadow?

"…Dude, why is my shadow *red*? Are you hiding in it or something?" Sasha turned away from her rust-stained shadow to glare at Barrel, who'd faded into a sheer, nearly-invisible outline. *Weenie*.

"Wait, it's *here* with us?" Grime demanded.

"Unfortunately," Sasha snorted. Flourished from Barrel, then to Grime. "Captain Grime Jago, meet Barrel Whatevertheheck."

"Barrel Farlowe, the Brave," Grime corrected reflexively, before shaking his head. "Wait, no, not important—You're *definitely* haunted, by a *red ghost*."

Campfire stories, was it Braddock who told this one? Whatever, Sasha recalled *something* like that, singular ghosts who toads believed were demonstratively more dangerous than a proper amalgamate guardian cairn-spirit. Ghosts without a proper group burial, who would go so far as to haunt and and eventually slay their own clanmates to consume their spirits, so the red ghost would no longer be a lone and isolated thing.

"…If it helps any, he's like a thousand years dead, so I don't think he has any loved ones to kill," Sasha said flippantly. She wasn't scared of a ghost who couldn't even *touch* anything. "Besides the king, I think, but he's kind of our target anyway."

< I don't want to *kill* him! >

Sasha ignored Barrel's offended squawking. "Plus he can't possess me or anything, so he must be the most weaksauce ghost ever. We have bigger things to worry about."

"Barrel the Brave. A *weak* spirit." Grime raised his eyebrow and set the lamp aside. "…I trust you in this, Lieutenant. Just…don't tell the Lords. A red ghost haunting you would…*complicate* our validity to lead."

Okay, so, same plan as before. Just…with a thousand-year-old hanger-on.

Barrel drifted above the human and ex-Southlord Grime—who was also an ex-*Captain*, which was *weird*. Cardinal Lords as vassals to the Newtopian *military* was certainly new to Barrel. Sure, everyone paid fealty to the crown, and everyone's expected to follow the basic laws of the united empire under the Leviathans, but clanheads, let alone the *Lords*, acting in a formal military position that was under direct command of another army was…unheard of. Hell, toad clans never had a formal army in the *first* place!

Barrel glanced down at the alien he was tied to like a kite, feeling both overwhelmed by all he'd learned of this modern Amphibia and bored out of his skull. Though at least he wasn't alone there, judging by Sasha's sleepy glare from her perch atop a tarantula's saddle. < So…if we're gonna be stuck together, I kinda want to know what *you* were, uh banished? For. >

'More like fugitives—desertion, technically,' Sasha projected to him. It hadn't taken her long to mentally 'talk' with Barrel on the same wavelength—kid caught on quick, and *really* didn't want to look weird in front of her guardian for talking to a ghost nobody else could see. '*The 'desertion' thing was a stupid excuse, though. Real reason was because we failed to kill some old man for stirring up rebellious sentiments in the frogs.*'

Tall, moon-faded memories floated up from Sasha's recollection—another human, vertigo and a whiplashed spine, plans in the officer's quarters, old tax collection reports, an outsider's view on Amphibia—

Barrel lit up like a sulfur-smoke storm, uncaring of each lava-lash of injustice that burned his living haunt, because what had *happened*, this went against every memory and rooted moral and oath he'd taken, to protect frog and toad and newt alike—

For the first time in a thousand years and in an oak-steady heart, Barrel felt unapologetically *angry* at such unfairness. He could take it, sure, but other amphibians, generations of toads and frogs—

Billowing emotions vanished like crushed embers, smothered under a narwhal-worm coils of Strength.

< …Sorry, > Barrel murmured, drifting closer to where the human child pinched

away a headache. < Didn't know the, um, feedback would be so strong. I'll try not to let it happen again. >

'*That was almost worse than your stupid attempt to possess me, so yeah, it* better *not*.' Sasha's heron-sharp glare told him that she'd be enforcing that boundary with fire and pain that even a dead toad could burn under—and the very fact that she *could* was a little scary.

Barrel saluted. < Right, sorry again, I just—I've never haunted anything else but my hammer, so I didn't think it would, uh, give you a headache like that. > And he *did* feel guilty about that. For all her sulfur-caustic soul and professed intent to stick a sword into Andrias's face, Sasha was a child.

...At least it appeared to take a *seriously* explosive emotional outburst for Barrel's memories and feelings to bleed onto Sasha. Which was a good thing, because Sasha—an *alien* child's—affinity for the power that embodied the Leviathan dynasty's divine right to rule *freaked Barrel out*, just a little; she wasn't channeling it, she *embodied* it, to the point that if he hadn't seen her take a narwhal-worm's horn to the forehead, Barrel would think she bled pink instead of red. Her Strength would burn him down to a spiritual scorch mark on the ground if he tried to possess her without permission again—Barrel forcibly guiding her hands to activate his Warhammer was a lucky fluke.

The Leviathan dynasty...< Listen, I knew things were kinda getting rough for us, and for frogs especially, but—I didn't think they'd be this bad. > What Barrel accidentally pulled from Sasha's head was just—too *much*. < That frog grandfather—you were seriously going to execute him? Without trial? Even by all these ridiculous new rules he didn't do anything wrong! >

'*Uh, duh, of course he didn't? But it's not like it mattered to the king.*' Sasha rolled her eyes—oh, ew, *gross*, humans' eyes were just mobile and free-floating in there? '*Like, Grime's wanted for desertion and you and I* both *know that's a lie. Rules are just a pretense for adults to do what they want and hurt who they want, usually for dumb reasons. I thought you'd know this already, you rusty fart.*'

Break the rules, avoid them, or go along with them. The memories of a crumbling tower and a dishonorable duel—Sasha had gone along with the rules that were almost as foreign to Barrel as they were to her, insignificant local curiosities that she'd thought little of, in the face of her own lava-hammered conviction to wrangle her friends and get home.

Or at least, those rules hadn't affected her until *now*, a wanted deserter from Amphibian military, wearing a toad's weapon and a toad's body language and behavior—she'd fit in well at North Tower—and soon would be wearing a toad's name, if Grime's detour meant what Barrel thought it did.

...Still, *eesh*. Hearing and *feeling* such a jade-sharp outlook from someone so young *really* made Barrel wonder where Grime pulled this alien from.

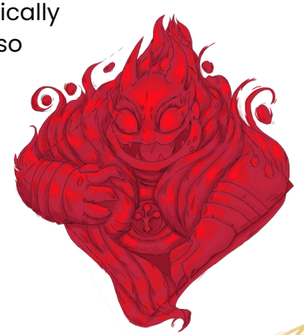
But there was a salt-grain of truth to Sasha's words, equally cynical and childish as they were. It...wasn't the first time someone was condemned for laws they didn't break, betrayals they never held the knife against, magic boxes they never stole—

Barrel quashed that uncharitable thought like overfed leeches under a boulder. No, there *had* to be a reason of some kind—and not a dumb one, like this tall toadlet declared. Andrias had always been such a sensitive heart, but sometimes that meant he had an equally vindictive streak, which was why he and Leif and Barrel balanced each other out so well—

'*Dude, I can literally hear the gears in your head turning. Stop poking me and just tell me what you want already,* red ghost.'

< I was just—thinking. We're literally stuck together for now, so, maybe we can make a deal? > Barrel always strove to be agreeable, even when his own personal or even moral objections tried to rear their disruptive heads. It was easier to just go with the flow, after all. < I...really, *really* want a chance to talk to Andrias. So you have to promise not to kill him! >

Because...What *happened* to Amphibia under his rule? Did he not see? Barrel understood the sulfur-sour rage against Leif's treason, and...to an extent, Barrel understood Andrias sending him away, after he forced himself to look past his own bruised feelings and think about it. It was...politically expedient, to reassign someone stained by sedition so Andrias's own eventual ascension to the throne went unchallenged.



'*I mean, we kindaaaa have to, otherwise he can just gather loyalists and take the crown back.*' Sasha tossed her hair back in an obvious, and *infuriatingly flippant*, dismissal.

Barrel dove down to hover in front of her, palms up in a false surrender. < Wait, listen! He'd be way more valuable as a hostage, right? Leverage to keep the guards from turning you into grub-kebabs? >

No matter *what*, Barrel had to keep one of his most beloved people alive. He was still a royal guard, he never rescinded his oaths of preserving the royal family's lives.

And…maybe if he brought the Calamity Box back, wherever it was—and with the aliens' goals to get home, they'd have to find it eventually—it would make up for his mistake that got it stolen in the first place. And then Barrel would be forgiven, and he could rattle Andrias's cloud-thick head and get him off his butt to *fix* Amphibia.

'*I suppose that does make sense,*' Sasha mused, slanted eyes peering up at him with an unnerving volcano-bright glow. '*But what are you going to do for me? Don't you know I'm a* clanless orphan *who claws for* every scrap I can get?'

Barrel couldn't help his snort at Sasha's sarcastically batted eyelashes. *Someone* wasn't a fan of how a few toads whispered about a gangly alien yet also a toad, who still remained clanless despite having an ex-Cardinal Lord as a guardian and a claim to the Farlowe name after unearthing Barrel's Warhammer.

< Sure. Honestly, I'm happy to help anyway, because you are…really far from home, I'm guessing, > Barrel said, rubbing at his chin and squinting. Even in the castle undergardens, he'd never seen an alien like *this*. < I know the basics of how the music box works, so if you can find it, I can try and help you get back to your planet. >

"What do you—our *planet*?" Sasha sputtered, before recovering so quickly Barrel almost missed her shock.

Barrel shrugged. < Well, I mean, yeah, I guess the box had to be on your home planet for a long time, but before that the royal family used it to get around. >

"How the heck did it end up on *Earth* where it could, I dunno, zap a couple humans all the way over here?" Sasha hissed lowly.

< I kind of, um. Messed up, really badly, and because of me the box got stolen. > *I should have listened to him the first time…*< Look, the point is that I know the

Calamity Box basics better than most people do, 'cause I was a future royal consort and expected to know. But! I don't know your planet's home address. 'Drias would, though. >

'*Wait wait wait, hold on, you* married *the guy?*'

< No, but I wanted to. >

'*…Ew, gross—No, never mind, that doesn't matter.*' Sasha shook the errant thoughts from her head like a heron shaking out kill-bloodied feathers. '*…So we* do *need to keep the king alive. Great, that's gonna go over* real *well when we rendezvous with the army…*'

"Sasha? Are you and, uh, Barrel, good back there?" Grime called back from his position at the head of their two-spider caravan. Sasha speaking aloud must have grabbed his attention…

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine, Grimesy. Though, I was hoping we could talk about changing the coup operations just a little bit…"

Long travel was nothing new to Sasha, nowadays. At least this time around they had a goal, as opposed to directionless wanderings—though it *was* pretty cool that their group was more likely to meet up with other caravans in this territory, nonmilitary toads who stubbornly stuck to their species' nomadic traditions.

Grime had insisted on a stopover at his hometown—Clan Jago's township, and the closest thing to a settled community toads had, besides army outposts and the Towers. He mentioned some roving camps returning to the township held connections and intel on Ranger sightings—of which Marcy apparently *was*.

He casually noted he had other stuff to take care of, specifically with his clanhead, but Sasha's smoke-wisp curiosity was barely a footnote in the face of a clear, bright path to finding Anne and Marcy on one of their little field trips.

Travel on spiderback was quicker than on foot, but not exactly human car-speed. Sasha had a lot of time to think about what might happen *after* the toads took over, which she preferred not to do, and a lot of time to talk, which she preferred over beating back annoying self-doubts and justifications and guilt with a mental

baseball bat. Barrel wasn't her *favorite* toad, but he wasn't a boring conversationalist, when he wasn't being a kingly bootlicker. He never did talk much about the narwhal-worm, though.

So, on a night of their travels, Sasha dreamed of dying.

She hung from the monstrous jaws of South Tower's crumbling parapets, digging her hands into water-sliding smudges of brick while the rest of her dangled, feather-weighted yet impossible to pull up. The distance of a single death below her, snake-ripples of brackish brown churned and waved.

'*Your failure*,' hissed the whistle of the wind, roared the accusatory light of the moon, traced the line of blood from cheek to strangled neck. '*Your guilt*.'

Though she never let go, not this time, Sasha fell.

Wild winds stole the breath right out of her lungs, constricting her ribs and her mind in the fear of *can't breathe, I'm gonna die, can't breathe, can't—*

The stone courtyard *splashed* when she hit it.

Thrashing legs and arms propelling her nowhere, Sasha drowned in failure and in swamp-dark water.

No weapon, it's injured but not dead*, stupid, left the hammer in its skull—*

Obscured by the muddy water, Sasha didn't see the thrashing narwhal-worm's tail hurtling towards her at bone-breaking speeds until it was too late—

Sasha bolted upright, kicking herself away so fast she nearly nailed Grime in his sleeping face.

< You're awake. > Barrel drifted closer, relieved, the cinder-glow of their dying campfire glowing through his translucent body like the toady freckles he used to have. < I was…getting pretty worried. Your Strength kept tugging at me, a *lot*. >

Barrel, the toad haunting her, who had died in battle against a narwhal-worm in the swamp—

Sasha clapped her palms over her mouth to prevent vomiting up swamp-water

that wasn't actually there—all that remained in reality were the tear-tracks *nobody*, not even the dead, were supposed to see.

'*…Was that how you died? You…drowned?*' It was…*terrifying*. That was the first time she'd died *twice* in a dream, drowning in air and in brackish water and her own blood—

< Yeah, it was. I always figured I'd die out there eventually—the sentence was pretty permanent. > Barrel folded his legs to sit on the air above the campfire embers. < But I couldn't even survive a decade without a worm shattering my ribcage just from its flailing. > Shudders rippled through his smoky form like summer heat-haze over asphalt. < You're a mammal, you wouldn't get it, but we aren't supposed to be able to drown. I *hate* it. >

'*No shit you do*,' Sasha mentally scoffed. Retraced Barrel's words, all the way back to his relationship—*ew*—to the king. '*Wait, sentence? As in, a* criminal *sentence? I thought you were some kinda hotshot folk hero*.'

< Not gonna lie, I was pretty surprised to hear about the folk hero thing. But no, I wasn't *actually* a criminal. I think. > Barrel's ghostly form flickered, bleeding an even darker red with discomfort. < But considering the terms of my reassignment were 'Don't come back unless you want to be court-martialed', it's as close to banishment as anyone gets. >

'*Lemme guess, punishment detail for messing up your music box guard job?*' Sasha pointed out wryly. And then prodded at their haunt-connection, because she was still cranky about the poor sleep—venting out her parentally-decreed 'attitude problem' was better than anyone hearing the salt-sound of fear in either her mental *or* physical voice. '*Thought you were the king's boytoy or something, couldn't he have bailed you out?*'

< Sasha! Don't be—that's so inappropriate! > Barrel sputtered, ghostly form failing to hide his pink-fogged face and equally failing to stop Sasha from snort-laughing at his offense. < No, listen, that's vulgar, you can't just *say* that about the Prince! And…Besides, he was the one who passed the sentence anyway. >

Flits and firefly-flickers of memory—a frog Sasha knew instantly as Barrel's partner, a chase, the ember-whizzing hum of Andrias's plasma sword—

Snotty giggles instantly evaporated in Sasha's throat. '*What the fu—Just because*

you hesitated to squish your girlfriend—who was also *his girlfriend!—into a warhammered pancake?!'*

Maybe part of it was weird ghost-memory backwash from Barrel, but Sasha was certain as Frog Valley's bone-rooted mountains that she *hated* Andrias the most out of any person on this alien planet.

This was the guy Barrel bargained so ardently for her to spare? Sasha already thought Barrel was too forgiving, if a big thickheaded, after absorbing just how different things were in the past and how they'd changed for the worse. But sending Barrel to his death just because he failed to attack their frog partner—a warhammer strike landing on someone that small would've been *lethal*...

Sasha would rather—and at some point, almost *did*—kill herself before she'd let her friends actually *die*.

Barrel's silence said more than any words could; Sasha filled that void with her own spitting vitriol. '*Dude, and you just folded like a camping chair? You didn't even* fight *it!*'

< It was—I couldn't argue. He was the prince. That was the end of the discussion. >

Sasha's dream-tinted fantasies of gallantly pulling Marcy and Anne away from Andrias and then not-so-gallantly poking the old newt full of stab wounds evaporated like steam.

End of discussion, the steam hissed and froze into a mirror of ice. All that vehemence burning against Andrias, the deterioration of his relationship through Barrel's memories, reflected *right* back at Sasha.

She felt like she couldn't *breathe*. '*I—god, like him, with Marcy and Anne—I never...*' *This feels terrible.* I *was terrible*.

Vibrating from the projected emotional whiplash like a struck bell, Barrel reached out a claw to awkwardly pat Sasha's hunched shoulder. < Um, at least you've never done the whole...Caste rank thing? >

Was that not what they were doing? When Grime came up with the plan, he said it was time for toads to be on top for a change.

Sure, it hadn't been Sasha's idea—her motivation was rooted in getting back—and getting back *at*—her friends after they ditched her, like they didn't *need* her. Like the thought of them both abandoning her for good, running off with each other and leaving her behind with her own greatest fears didn't make Sasha want to claw her own heart out of her chest—

Well, she could see how Grime's idea made sense. Toads would present a more level playing field, where strength earned positions that *required* strength—even a clanheir had to pass the rest of the clan's muster to take their seat. Even Sasha herself, a clanless human, was a participant of this playing field just as much as any frog or toad or newt, though her participation was for purely personal reasons...at first. Not to mention the Cardinal Lords would be better than *Andrias* of all people, dirt-low of a bar as that was.

Oh, who was she *kidding*, after getting so many brainfuls from Barrel about the way things used to be, and bonding with Grime as she immersed so thoroughly into toad society outside of South Tower that she started to *feel* like one...just replacing newts with toads felt kinda gross.

Marcy and Anne were a way more pressing concern, though. She—Sasha couldn't tell them about the coup. Despite the acid-burn realization that her thorned grip on her friends left them tangled and hurt, despite her reluctant plans to loosen her control lest she turn out like Andrias—Sasha was not giving up control of the *situation* surrounding them.

It wasn't pushing Marcy and Anne around, or forcing manipulative ultimatums on them that would turn them against Sasha if she made them choose between someone who hurt them or someone who hadn't *yet*.

And Andrias could, Sasha *knew* it. Marcy and Anne were directly under his influence and his roof, so they'd be the first hurt if they let anything slip about their connection to someone planning his deposition. Heck, Sasha saw in Barrel's memories how quick Andrias was to draw his sword on his *fiancé* with intent to maim.

Flashpaper memories of her toad-style duel with Anne reeled behind Sasha's eyes, singed with guilt and a reflexive frustration that she forcibly suppressed; her mind then conjured a fire-filmed overlay, Andrias's hands around her heron-head sword and pointing it at Barrel and a faceless frog...

Sasha dug her fingers into the grass-furred clearing until the gritty soil embedded

painfully into her fingertips. Better than envisioning them wrapped around a sword and leveled at her friends. Better than Barrel's marrow-soft look of pity, as if even a *red ghost* of all things thought Sasha was messed up.

Sasha hadn't truly protected them in years, so she planned to start *now*, by protecting them from the inevitable backlash through their ignorance.

So while she couldn't tell them about the coup, Sasha *could* apologize. And maybe, after showing them Andrias was a jerkwad who she needed to pry the Earth address out of, and how she still protected them, fought their enemies, even people they didn't *know* were their enemies…

They'd forgive her, and things could go back to normal.

'Hey so it was, um. Wrong of Andrias, to hurt you like that.' It was wrong of me *to hurt* them *like that. 'But…if he apologized for everything, and* meant *it, would you forgive him?'*

Would Marcy and Anne forgive her?

< Yeah, I would, > Barrel said, owl-soft.

'So you're going to talk to your friend, and I—' Sasha cleared her throat, whispering aloud to make it more *real*. "I think I'm gonna talk to mine too. I owe them an apology for hurting them."

She'd apologize *after* the coup. Which they would win, and even if it wasn't in the planned covert way…

Sasha picked up the tube containing the collapsible storage form of Barrel's Warhammer. Pictured the moon-vivid shock on Andrias's face when he saw a dead fiancé's runed heirloom in the hands of an alien heritor, with a bared smile and bared weapons laden with the promise of *red*—either blood, or the crimson ghost the king created.

She'd draw a way home out of King Andrias. One way or another.

There's every possibility this is undoubtedly a trap.

Anne's not stupid; the surety drags its frostbitten heels in sweeping steps down her spine even now. Yet, she's here: navigating winding halls, traversing the facility's darkest depths. She can't fathom its use. All she's found: rusted machinery, moth-eaten junk, and stale air that infiltrates her nostrils, causing her to choke on musty aftertaste. Still, she scrunches her nose disgustedly, carving through cobwebs, further into the unsprung trap.

There'd been warnings, of course. Unmissable clues woven into rumours. Signals flashing red amongst breadcrumb trails down deceptive paths. They'd been ignored too, despite Sasha delicately warning it was—*oh, without doubt*—an ambush.

After all, King Andrias isn't stupid either; every move's deliberate, calculated, ruthless. By now, Anne understands. The façade's broken—true colours shine heart-locked *blue,* tipped with corroding *orange.* He wouldn't leave things to chance. He's a mastermind. Manipulative. Cunning. But above all: desperate. For what, Anne's uncertain, but he wouldn't leave the pawn to his king, the final puzzle piece—*her*—outside Newtopia's walls.

Still, the reports don't lie. Beyond his poison-laced protection, locked behind bars inside this far-gone facility on the outskirts of nothingness, there are tales of a fallen soul, the forgotten one, the lost *human.*

The only reason Anne's even here.

"She's worth the risk!" she'd frantically convinced the others in Wartwood, which'd been challenging. Even Sasha was worried; there'd been no doubt after a grave expression befell her, eyes dark, shadowed with something Anne couldn't place. It'd only lasted seconds before washing away with renewed *pink* resolve.

It's Sprig's reaction that surprised her. He'd been quiet; cautious. Then awfully, he'd looked at her with pitying eyes and taken her hand.

"Are you sure about this Anne? What if you don't like what you find?"

A charcoal-cold laugh escapes her and frustrated, she slashes more aged moss. The truth: she's not. The thought of what lies ahead—what she might learn—burns her throat, flickering embers catching every breath, sparking a firestorm of maelstrom. Flames sit atop her tongue, curls of *blue* rasping her trachea, seizing her smouldering lungs, filling with dense, blackened smog.

Or maybe it's all the dust. Either way, they've got to try. If they don't, she'd never forgive herself. For letting slip, letting go, leaving behind once again.

Anne continues down derelict, dim hallways. *Orange* sinks in, sunlight splashing through dust-ridden windows. The floor sticks to her steps horribly, but the earlier inferno keeps her hurried strides ablaze. Breathlessly, she runs, azure-scorched heart nestled tight within her throat, a far-off alarm wailing behind. A pulsating ache matches the fading beat, and with her senses overwhelming, blooming *blue,* Anne ignores it.

It's unnerving how empty it is, and the more Anne searches, the more she veers towards the snares waiting fangs. Admittedly, she expected more, but there's nothing: no guards, no more alarms. Just stillness broken by her thunderous steps and tired breath. What feels like seconds, minutes, and hours pass—finding only ruined corridors and vacant rooms. Behind each door, she's met with hopelessness: only dust, ruin, and one sinking heart.

"Go on ahead, I've got your back," Sasha's words float in. A promise before parting—she'd act as distraction whilst Anne investigates. *"It'll be easier,"* she'd explained, and there'd been that courageous grin that's always filled Anne with hopeful inspiration. *"Find Marcy."*

Hold on, we're coming, Anne vows. She's already lost her once. No matter what, that can't happen again.

But it's foolish to deny something's amiss. Of all the atrocities, lies and deceit, Andrias wouldn't slip now. He'd already wrapped them around his fingers once; a puppeteer stringing them along, played right into his conniving hands. There's no reason for things to change. They've played this game for weeks, maybe months—Anne's lost track. To Andrias, Marcy's nothing more than an advantage. A ruse. Bait.

To Anne, Marcy's a tender hand intertwined within hers. She's endearing brown eyes that glisten within sunlight. A bubbly laugh that lights the shallowest of hearts. A cheerful, infectious smile. Love. Comfort. Home.

If there's a chance to save Marcy, they *must* take it.

Back home, Anne didn't like thinking of Marcy. *Couldn't.*

Every time, *orange* would welcome her. The putrid colour still festers whenever her eyes close, a backlit canvas of explosive fire. It razes everything: hopeful dreams, terrifying nightmares, painful memories.

Useless, really. Marcy's a constant, the glue, the true heart. Traces of her are everywhere. In every place, Marcy's pitter-pattered footsteps follow. In every room, her silent smile shimmers. In every dream-turned-nightmare, Marcy's trembling breath dies. No matter how Anne tried—stowing them inside a familiar music box in her mind—she couldn't stop thinking about it, of her, of *Marcy.*

That'd hurt: pretending. Like it's no big deal. Like everything's the same. It's hard ignoring two empty spaces, but Anne couldn't—and her breath hitches—she couldn't let Marcy's ghost linger. It'd only have forced her to face the reality of what she'd witnessed.

A blade bathed in orange sunlight. The sun-fire sword crescent-falls. Salt-soaked tears stain paling cheeks. Marcy stares ahead, eyes locked with hers. Her mouth moves. Choked words: an apology for everything.

The memory alone is enough, slowing Anne's descent into the pitfall. She couldn't handle it—losing them both. One stranded far from home, bridges burnt, towers toppled, cheek scarred. The other abandoned, dead atop lost hopes and dreams, *orange* crackling bright as night looms.

So, she buried it. Six feet under, trapped within the music box singing a sorrowful tune. A dirge for the locked tomb full of the lost, fallen, and left behind.

But Marcy's alive. The revelation had quelled the fears but unearthed that hidden crypt. An empty casket—one Anne can't avoid, mind returning to the one thought lost.

Marcy, the girl never seen without a smile, one Anne now knows never reached her eyes. Who'd excitedly talk about her interests, speaking nothing about her worries. Who Anne thought she'd understood most, but couldn't *trust* her friends, not even Anne.

Marcy, who'd known her mistake yet had got back to her feet, head held high, ready to fix everything: and she did.

Marcy gave them everything and in return, she'd…

Anne stops but the tears don't. Breath wavering, she leans on the wall, desperately wiping the tears, throat bobbing as she gulps down lumps of oxygen. She'd been so afraid of losing Marcy. She never considered she'd lost her long before. If only Marcy had said, talked to her, trusted her—but then, what reason had Anne given her?

They've all made mistakes.

Anne sniffles, taking another deep breath before continuing. They'll do better now. Just like her friends have done for her, she'll do the same. She's already begun that journey in Amphibia, and in her time away, she's started understanding something else.

Nothing, not distance or time, can break the bonds they share. With all her heart, Anne believes that and that's why it'll be okay.

All they need is Marcy.

Eventually, Anne's convinced they've got bad intel. In these places, there's usually ghosts, horrors, and mysteries. Here? Only rust-ridden robots she'd left with Sasha. Even then, Anne's not seen them since—which is fine, right? Sasha's strong, capable; she's handled more than discontinued bots.

Before she considers the possibility it's not, something changes.

Dull, droning buzzing: overheated computers running overtime. It skitters uncomfortably along skin, prickling goosebumps on her arms. It's surely nothing good, but a welcome change. Warily, Anne raises her sword, stilling her nerves and follows the alluring call, where it thrums behind a new door.

With a bloodcurdling whine, it creaks open. *Green* light floods the new room. Reaching forward, its nails hook hastily, entangling pitch-black shadows.

Lightning trails ghost along surfaces, leaving everything in muted, persistent *green*.

At the back: towering monitors brimming with *green* numbers. Intangible codes trickle downwards, draining away. From the screens, wide cables coil, meandering the room, rivers of *green* following their course. Enthralled, she watches them twist, tangling into strangling knots, before returning to the centre. Anne gasps.

Amid the carnage on a corrupted, grotesque throne, the girl Anne's sought is unrecognisable.

She looks so small. Overgrown hair shrouds Marcy's face, head hanging, body slack, limbs locked within steel. Her attire's changed too, replaced with a dark, harrowing carapace. A matching pronged helm rests atop her lap, reflecting weak *greens* as everything melts into shadows. One thing stands out though, twisting Anne's insides: a single *orange* eye embellished on her chest.

"Marcy?" Anne calls, sheathing her sword before cautiously stepping forward.

Nothing.

Anne's heart plummets, dropping into the void, *blue* fire doused in gelid waters. Frost gathers in its place, icy tendrils spreading, enveloping limbs, creeping to her fingertips. But she's so close; Marcy's right there. A fruit overhanging the ledge: almost within reach.

There's every possibility this is undoubtedly a trap.

"Now go," Marcy had sadly told her once, *"follow your heart."*

Blue blooms, frigid pull thawing. Anne's known loss, forgiveness, and love. One life without Marcy was enough, and this time, she's not leaving again. Filled with heartful *blue,* Anne races forward, caution disregarded, leaping over trip-wire cables, stepping between pressure-point gaps.

"Marcy, please," she cries, laced with mourning *blue,* "we're here, *I'm* here."

Collapsing against the chair, Anne gingerly touches Marcy's throat and flinches. Marcy's always naturally cold, but this is tenfold. Up close, she looks awful. Dark rings line her eyes, skin sickly pale. No wonder she doesn't respond, still Anne checks for a heartbeat matching the rapid pounding in her chest. A second passes. Then another. And then–

There! A pulse, thready and faint, but there. Just as she finds it, there's another sign of life: a feeble whimper. Despite how her heart twinges, Anne chokes back a relieved sob.

"It's alright, I've got you Marce," Anne promises, hand moving to cup her cheek. Using the other, she tucks falling strands from her face. At the touch, Marcy winces. Brows pinching together, her eyes weakly flutter, slivers of subdued *green* peeking within glassy brown. It's heartbreaking; she looks so exhausted, pained, but she's here: alive.

"Stay with me, okay? I'll get us outta here."

Lightly, Anne kisses Marcy's forehead before reluctantly moving, watching as her eyes drift shut, head drooping from lack of strength. It hurts, and Anne would rather hold her close, never letting go, but it's not safe. Instead, she summons *blue* energy within her palms, carefully prying at the shackles with a huff.

Just like that, the tripwire finally *snaps.*

Shrill, mechanical whirring. *Green* lights flicker. Alarmed, Anne looks up, and the monitors crash. On each screen: pixels glitch, before suddenly switching off completely. Plunged into darkness, frantically she fumbles for Marcy's hand but abruptly, she's blinded by another light. The screens flood *orange.* Overwritten, overridden. There's another loud *clack* and Marcy's restraints unlock.

Jolting forward, Marcy wakes with a gasp, startling Anne whose hands hover hesitantly over her, afraid to touch, to hold, to let go.

"You're alright," Anne reassures, but her voice wavers. Something's off; wrong.

Eerily, Marcy turns, smiling. It's not one she recognises. This chills Anne to the core, distorting Marcy's face—puppet strings pulled taut. Menacing. Malicious. Dark.

"Oh, dear Anne," Marcy—no, the voice isn't right, all contorted like that smile, "you're terribly predictable. You really thought we'd just let her go?"

"Who are you?" Anne demands, fighting the urge to squirm away, but she's terrified, conflicted, "what have you done with Marcy?"

"We're The Core," they snicker, lounging back, kicking their feet up."Oh, don't worry. Marcy's safe but we're the ones in control."

Marcy's the trap.

Fear spills from that buried box of terrors. Horrified, Anne stumbles out of reach, scared, unsure and The Core hungrily watches. *Orange* blazes within their eyes, boring holes into Anne's tormented heart, stomach churning under their watch. Heart thumping rapidly, Anne steps away but strangely, The Core's smile widens. Raising a brow, they watch Anne's quivering hands and—following their gaze—Anne hadn't noticed. Her sword's raised towards them: both the pretender and *Marcy.*

"You wouldn't hurt her again, would you?"

Of course not. It doesn't matter whatever this thing is—behind it, that's still Marcy and whilst Anne's frightened, she'd never willingly hurt her; and they *know.* Discarding their helmet, The Core hops from their throne, sauntering closer and Anne...Anne freezes.

In three easy strides, it's game over. The trap's sprung, noose tied. However, they calmly push aside her trembling sword. Drawing nearer, breath tickling her skin, The Core delicately cups her face, tilting Marcy's head with a dangerous grin.

"It's alright, we've got you Anna-Banana," they repulsively mimic. "Stay with us, okay? We'll keep you safe."

Something inside Anne snaps. Pulling away, she slaps their hands, raising her sword defensively.

"Give her back."

For a moment, The Core's smile fades, *orange* eyes glowering. They laugh—a hollowed, horrible thing—and Anne glares as they turn back to the throne. Cackling, they slide their helmet over Marcy's head, shrouding her from the world before spinning

around. With a reclaimed wicked smile, wires snake towards them, handing them a staff. Grabbing it, *orange* bursts from one side: becoming a giant burning scythe.

"Come take her then."

Swinging their weapon high, The Core runs at her, and Anne quickly blocks. A booming *clang* resounds, room exploding into colour. Metal collides against metal, *orange* sparks spraying on impact. Howling with laughter, The Core recoils, and seeing an opening, Anne slams her sword's pommel into their chest, shoving them backwards. But The Core's surprisingly agile, stomping a boot down, stopping the motion before rebounding back like a slingshot.

"Marcy, I know you're there, please, fight it!" Anne yells, dodging. It's all she can do. Striking back would only hurt Marcy and doing nothing's certain death. There's barely time to breathe. *Orange* swirls ahead, almost mesmerising until searing heat flares from every attack. Urgently, Anne pushes back, throwing blunt blows and punches—trying to break away. She just needs space; time to think, to plan, to understand.

After another vicious lunge, The Core suddenly pulls back. Anne knows it's useless, but forlornly, she searches their eyes for any recollection, recognition, remembrance. There's nothing: only thousand-aged *orange* wrath. Smirking, The Core waves, and on command, legions of cables come alive. Bringing their hand down like a gavel, wires spring out, taking viper-like swipes and Anne weaves to avoid them, slashing their attacks.

"We knew Andrias wouldn't be enough," their voice echoes, and when the last wire drops, Anne realises they've disappeared. Cords begin slithering around the room, a growing vortex, and Anne stands guard, watching the shadows. "Maybe if you come quietly, we'll let Marcy out to play."

A lie. Still, Anne needs to do something fast. The room's too tight, constricting—she needs more space. "What do you want from us?"

"Control. Power," they scoff, and a cape flitters from Anne's left. Turning, ready to defend, she's met with nothing. Wires skid on her right, and facing back again, there's nothing.

"Maybe a little bit of chaos!"

Scampering footsteps rush behind her and Anne swivels as The Core crashes towards her. She follows the motion, conjuring *blue* within her fist, landing a hit as they dive past, sending them careening into heaps of wires, burying them underneath.

There's only one thing to do: she runs. Not away—to lure them out, away from this trap, back outside. There, she'll have a chance, she just needs to–

"Darling, running ain't enough!"

Something smashes into her and Anne falls. Head slamming against the floor hard, stars dot her vision, and she groans as wires entangle her torso. The room spins, and so does she—forced onto her back, trapped in place. Blinking rapidly, trying to recover, a haze of *orange* burns above her. But everything hurts, her ears ring, vision swirling. Something stomps her chest, knocking the wind from her. Wires constrict, choking her out, she's unable to move, to speak, to breathe.

"Gotcha."

The last thing she remembers is a smile, a scythe, and a scream.

Anne wakes slowly. A cool breeze ruffles her curls, something fluffy and warm wrapped around her shoulders. Her head rests against someone else's, arms embracing her, and opening her eyes, there's a flash of familiar blonde.

"Oh, you're awake," Sasha says softly, haloed by golden afternoon sun. They're outside, with Anne resting in her lap but her head's fuzzy, aching. "How's your head? You took a hard hit."

Memories flood in: Marcy. The Core. Hastily, Anne scrabbles up, wincing as her head pangs agonisingly. Green swirls her vision, mixing with yellows, pinks, and orange. Sasha fusses over her, stilling her movement, holding tighter.

"Where's Marcy?"

The world dims when Sasha looks away, unable to meet her eyes. "I couldn't risk losing you too."

Anne's heart breaks.

"We left her, Sash," Anne sobs, tears spilling, burying into the crook of Sasha's neck. A hand holds her in place, rocking back and forth. "The Core—they're controlling her and we just—we left her *again.*"

"I know,"—she doesn't, she can't possibly understand—"but we'll get her next time."

It should've been *this* time. She promised—Marcy promised she wouldn't lose her, not again. "This is all our fault."

"No!" Sasha rushes, peeling Anne back, holding her shoulders. "Don't say that. We're not responsible for this. You said it yourself, remember? We've all made mistakes, but him? Andrias? He's evil."

There's truth to what she says, but it doesn't hurt any less. "I miss her."

"Me too," Sasha says, voice breaking, wiping Anne's tears with a thumb. "At least we know what we're up against. I swear Anne, we're not giving up. We'll bring her back—together."

Sasha's eyes flicker with determined *pink,* and it's enough to spark a hue of hopeful *blue* within her. She's right—whilst it's not what they'd wanted, The Core can't get the jump on them again.

"Together," she echoes, and numbly Anne huddles into Sasha's side again, "she always wanted us together, didn't she?"

"That's Marcy for you," Sasha hums. "We'll get our lovable nerd back and whatever happens, we'll be there for her. But please, get some rest. I'll keep watch."

Anne nods, eyes drooping. Before sleep takes her, she thinks of Marcy. Not who she'd fought earlier: *her* Marcy. Between swirling *greens,* she kneels beside them, resting a hand on Sasha's shoulder, another interlocking with Anne's hands and Anne holds tight.

You told me once to follow my heart, just promise me you'll follow yours and we'll meet again in the middle.

a note from the author

This fic was a huge battle to get written as Amphibia is no longer my primary interest, but I'm much happier with how it came together than I expected to be during the process. I've written so much for this fandom and put so much love and work into it ever since it had less than 500 works on ao3 and tried so hard to put that into this without my heart being as invested as it once was; I hope it didn't suffer too greatly from how taxing it was from the writing end. This is not the vision I had in mind when I began writing months ago, but after tying it up as it exists now, I'm proud of where I ended up with it after such a hard journey to get it to where it is.

warnings for:

some blood/violence related to the events of true colors!

∞

5. Drift

The absence of feeling is stranger than any actual sensation. She is drifting; thoughts as fleeting and hollow as snowflakes. She is conscious, but there is nothing to perceive. The world is a pulsing, flowing teal haze that has begun to feel as empty as a dark void, and down her arms, there is no transition between her skin and surroundings.

There is one variable—one thing that brings interest to her numbness, the feeling of drifting in an endless sky with no land below. Beyond the moss-tinted blue, there is orange, warm and deep and as rich as magma. The glow comes from behind her, breathing steady into ragged lungs, foreboding and waiting and looming.

And it fades, and again, she is drifting.

3. After

Wartwood understands as well as they would expect it to. The battle-weary heroes land amidst the gathered townspeople at sunrise.

“Where’s Anne?” the crowd asks, worried for their town hero. “Where are the Plantars?”

“Where’s Marcy?” some add, too: a small blue frog with her bangs hanging harshly in her face, those she got to know during the days she spent in the town.

“I—” Sasha starts, trying to think of what to say. *The king was…there was a battle.* The words don’t make it past her lips. She slides from Joe Sparrow’s feathered back, facing them and her unsteady legs on the ground, but fails to keep her gaze on the frogs. “I failed.”

They give Sasha and the toad captain space as they settle in the Plantars’ empty farmhouse.

10. Flight

The darkness breaks in thin slivers around her eyes, sleep-weary and floating through dull throbs of pain. Rough metal rests against her sweat-slick cheek, cold and heavy as her body is rocked by jolts of movement. The world stills, and she stays slack and limp, disoriented enough that she only knows she’s laying down. Smooth motion shifts beneath her, gentle and swift. She barely notices the chilling breeze as a soft weight settles over her body, and her eyes close again.

4. After

On sunlit mornings, Sasha wakes in the basement with light shining through the high window and filtering through the dancing dust that drifts and settles from the clouds rolling away from the factories rolling out robotic armies in earnest. It feels like an empty state of limbo, waiting for strategic motion or a change in stasis.

She pulls herself from bed and dresses in plain clothes she’s borrowed from the

frogs of Wartwood, tending to the farm and house in the Plantars’ absence. As the sun sets and casts the valley in dusty reds, she trains behind the house, refusing to lose her skill with her sword even as days become weeks and months.

When she makes her way into the cellar, to sleep beneath the floorboards where Anne once slept, the dark thoughts creep in.

Whether she’ll see Marcy and Anne again.

If they’re safe.

If they’re both alive.

If any of them will make it through this war that still seems surreal beyond the terror and violence and scars.

Some nights, she sleeps heavily, worn out from long days of hard work.

Others, she wakes from nightmares in a cold sweat, a sword through Marcy’s back stamped inside her eyelids as a constant reminder.

She lies on her back in the dark and waits.

6. Drift

She doesn’t know if she likes the orange that fades in and out of her vision. She thinks…her chest hurts when she sees it. It’s strange to feel something when the rest of her is shapeless and slumbering.

Her thoughts move with it like foam cresting waves. Her slow breathing synchronizes with it mechanically, sleeping but awake; purposeless but waiting.

Time means as little as feeling. The seconds crawl past and settle in the water like sand, or they slip away and dissolve into the brine that keeps her weightless. Blinking could be days of sleep without her knowing the difference.

2. Fade

The throne room is dark and shattered around Sasha, panes of broken stained glass and laser-scorched tiles all pointing inwards on one thing like a web of cracks in a window. Marcy stands, mid-motion, with the yellow light of Andrias's sword struck through her chest.

The world blurs to silence. Marcy slumps to the ground, unconscious—*not dead, unconscious*— and the portal closes in a blaze of white light as the music box slips from her limp fingers.

Sasha is at Marcy's side before she knows she's running. She doesn't hear Grime calling her to retreat with him, has no idea if Andrias is preparing to strike again—every thought in her mind is focused on Marcy. She pulls her into her arms. She's shaking, frighteningly limp, her eyes unfocused and full of uncried tears.

"Marcy?" she tries, voice trembling.

Marcy mouths something, trying to speak, and the blood spreading from the hole in her chest starts spreading more quickly.

"Sasha!" Someone is shouting behind her. She doesn't want to turn to leave.

"You're gonna be okay, Marcy. We can—we can worry about all—all that later, okay? It's okay, everything's gonna be okay, you're gonna be fine."

"Sasha! Move!"

Sasha finally looks back.

Andrias glares down at her, brandishing the flaming blade of his sword, still as pure and brilliant and deadly as it had been before it pierced through Marcy's body. She gulps. Grime is standing by the window, furiously motioning for her to follow him.

Sasha lets Marcy go and *sprints*.

As she runs to join Grime in fleeing Andrias's wrath, she doesn't allow herself so much as a glance back. If she saw Marcy again, left to die alone, she's afraid she'd be unable to actually make it out alive.

7. Shift

Sasha is dreaming.

She knows this, because Marcy is here, and Marcy is alive.

She hangs in the light like a caterpillar in its cocoon, a preserved creature floating behind glass. Her eyes are closed, her body is all but completely limp, but there's a faint crease in her brow like she's just barely awake enough to feel—Sasha can see the hole in her chest through the veined wetsuit, blood built against it like a dark shadow. It's dark beyond the glass that holds Marcy, vast and empty yet claustrophobic as it closes it around them.

Sasha cautiously raises her gloved hand and presses it to the glass. It's warmer than she would've thought.

In a split second that passes faster than Sasha can process, orange light flares into the dark as crescent-glaring eyes open in a blaze and she jerks upright in bed, drenched in sweat. The pale glow of the rusty moonlight should be the only light she sees, but the room is awash in flickering deep pink. She blinks, and it returns to normal.

She lays back with a sigh.

11. Flight

Sasha's eyes are fixed on Marcy on Joe Sparrow's back beside her. The war-torn countryside of Amphibia is a patchwork beneath the smoggy clouds, but she trusts the bird to take them to safety.

She has laid her fur cloak across the sleeping girl's thin body. The air at the heights where Joe Sparrow flies is thin and cold, and Marcy was shivering in the thin,

damp wetsuit she had found her in before she even made it out of the castle. Sasha's hand is resting against Marcy's wrist, not too light to track the heartbeat beneath the slick material of the wetsuit, when Joe gives a stressed chirp and Sasha jolts to immediate attention, hair swept by the wind as her eyes lock in on a trio of robots closing in from the direction of the castle.

Sasha doesn't have to give so much as a signal to Joe—he knows well enough to dive towards the canopy, where the trees will make pursuit difficult even if the leaves fail to confuse their heat tracking systems.

8. Shift

"We need to go back to the castle," Sasha says, when Grime wakes up. She's been up for hours already, ever since her dream, and their usual sleep schedule isn't exactly leisurely. Dark circles hang under her eyes like bruises.

"Is this about…your friend? What was her name, M—?"

Sasha cuts him off. "Marcy. Her name is Marcy."

"Sasha, we've been over this—the miniscule chance of her being alive isn't worth risking our own lives. If Anne makes it back—" ("She will," Sasha interjects) "—you said it yourself, you don't want her coming back to an empty house. Besides, didn't Marcy, well, betray you…?"

"I know, I just—ugh!" Sasha kicks the leg of the kitchen table in frustration, remembering she's barefoot save for her heavily darned socks a moment too late to stop her from wincing in pain.

She stands up, brushing the crumbs of the soggy cricket-flour waffle she'd had for breakfast off her tunic.

"I—she's alive. She needs me, Grime, and I can't let her stay locked away with the frogdamned king!"

Grime looks at her intently. "You're serious about this."

"It wasn't obvious?" Sasha replies, crossing her arms.

He nods in thought for a moment. "We can plan and gather supplies today. You can take her bird tomorrow. You look like you need a full night's rest before running into something like this."

Sasha doesn't argue.

Instead, she lets out a breath that had been tight in her chest for far too long.

I'm coming for you, Marcy.

It won't be much longer.

1. Fade

It's a moment she never wants to relive.

It's strange, she thought, head spinning from hitting the stone wall as she blinked dizziness from her vision and fought to stay on her feet to continue the battle, *how quickly your world can fall apart around you.*

So soon after a betrayal that had left her reeling with her gut twisted in knots of confusing emotions—because she didn't *want* to go home but Marcy didn't *ask* and she'd gotten them all *stuck* here and she's almost glad her hands were tied when she'd revealed her secret, fearing what she might've done with a sword in her hands, but in turn, she herself had almost smashed it on the cobbled streets of Newtopia only that very afternoon—a brand new expression of horror morphed into shape on her face.

And it's true, it must've happened in a fraction of a second in total, but when she remembers it, it's stretched out into a slow motion movie.

Andrias turning, sword ready to strike, Anne shouting for Marcy, Marcy responding with half a sentence that she never finishes because *holy shit his sword just went through her.*

And she knows that she ran to her side after the light of the portal closed and knelt on the charred ground beside the box where it had fallen from Marcy's fingertips and watched the blood creep across the ground towards her knees like a puddle of spilled dark wine, but it's a blur of screams and crying and *"Sasha, move!"* and

wind whipping the burnt ends of her hair into a frenzy.

And Marcy was gone, left alone in the castle, and Sasha tried to find herself from within the wreck left behind.

9. Drift

She has been floating for far too long. Her consciousness wavers—she's slipped in and out of that half-awake state long enough that she can't tell when she's aware of the bubbles tickling her swaying hair, or when her mind drifts off into a distant dream. The transitions move smoothly, without thought or memory. It's peaceful.

Breathing means little; the water carries whirring into her ears that groans in time with the movement of her chest. It hurts.

She doesn't know why.

Hurting means little, too.

It's present, constant, piercing through her so thoroughly that it's just another part of her.

Like the water, the currents, the gentle ebb and flow.

She's numb in a distant sort of way; she feels herself, but like a distant witness.

And then there's sound and noise and air and "Oh my god Marcy are you okay look at me please breathe please stay awake" and the stone is rough and hard and solid against her back and it hurts and she coughs and coughs and grabs for anything to hold her mind in its place because it is all far too much.

And her hands find another pair of hands, sword-callused but thin and delicate with memories of sleepover manicures and pink nail polish and walking back from the playground, two pairs of clasped hands and three kids in a row.

"Mmm…Sashy?" she murmurs, sounding the first syllables that have left her mouth in frog knows how long into Sasha's shoulder as she lifts her into her battle-toned arms.

"I'm getting you out of here," Sasha says, and she still doesn't quite know where *here* is, but something about it lets her relax. It's still far too much after so much *nothing* but she can make it either way.

12. Flight

Marcy's in and out of consciousness still, her lucidity varying each time. Sasha fears to know what condition she's in, but she's been breathing on her own ever since the first few terrifying seconds after the tank, and that's all that matters. There's no safe place now to examine her for injuries, though—there are robots stalking the forest, and Joe creeps through the undergrowth cautiously as Sasha and Marcy follow on foot. It's slow progress, with such a large bird to account for and with Marcy, though worryingly thin, practically dead weight in her arms.

They'd made it into the valley before the frobots caught up, thank frog, and Sasha estimates Wartwood is a day's journey away at most.

Her breath hitches as red light sweeps through the shadows, ducking around and behind a tree without a pause. Joe makes it to a branch that hides him out of sight among the leaves in a handful of near-silent wingbeats, and Sasha shrinks to the ground with her heart pounding.

She clings to Marcy as the robot comes close enough to hear its grinding metal, smell the exhaust from its engine, as if the unconscious girl would comfort her in return. For a moment, in the dark of the woods, she is a scared thirteen-year-old girl who has never held a sword in her life. Her fingers find their way to a dagger hanging from her belt, trembling too much to unsheath it.

The light pierces the vines and ferns again, flashing across the tree trunks in the dark like lightning. She holds Marcy tighter, praying to whatever higher power is out there for things to end well.

And the lights cut back to blackness, replaced by the hot glow of the robot's jets as it launches back into the sky, leaving no sign it was there except a rustling of twigs and a thin gap in the leaves. Through it, Sasha can see the thin sliver of the red moon.

She waits another minute to be sure the robot is really gone, gathers herself, and

whistles for Joe Sparrow. He glides to the ground quickly, shifting his feathers with the stress of such a close call as Sasha finds herself cooing into the down of his neck. When he seems less skittish, she hoists Marcy onto his back before climbing on as well.

And they're away into the sky, towards Wartwood at last.

There's hope for what small resistance Wartwood can be called. Marcy is here, and soon Anne will be too if things continue to go well.

The sun is rising to the east, and the world looks lighter for once.

BABY, YOU GOT ME FALLING

(BUT NOT IN A GOOD WAY)

WRITTEN BY: GLACECAKES
ILLUSTRATED BY: PEEBSZZZ

a note from the author

This entire fic was written for a single joke. A singular punchline. I regret nothing. If you enjoyed please feel free to check me out on AO3, and a special thank you to Peebs for drawing this adorable comic, and the zine organizers for setting this up!

∞

The past few weeks have been…odd. A good odd! But still really odd.

Maybe not the time itself, but the feeling in Sasha's gut is what's weird. It's almost fluttery, bubbly, but also…awful? Painful? Like she wants to throw up, but it's not necessarily…bad. Does Amphibia have dysentery? She really hopes not. If she died of a random disease Anne would probably hold it over her head forever.

Or maybe…maybe it's because Anne is back.

Sure, yeah, she expected Anne to *try* and find a way back, but for it to actually be possible without the music box…? Anne says it was thanks to those powers she randomly got the last time they spoke. Boy is she glad that Anne didn't get those powers when she and Sasha were fighting, she would've absolutely kicked her a—

"Sasha! Helloooo, wake up!"

"W-huh?"

It takes a few seconds for her to come back to reality. The muddy soil on her knees is slowly seeping through her pants the longer she stays kneeling. Man, she's getting sloppy. When did she just suddenly…nod off? Drift into space? During a mission, no less!

"You ok, dude?" Anne cocks her head to the side. "I just kinda lost you there."

"I think so, sorry." she shakes her head, even giving it a whack or two. As if somehow she can shake out the thoughts through her ear. "Must not have slept well or something."

"Well, can you save the nap for after we destroy this outpost?" Anne looks over the log they're crouched behind. She's got her hands on her sword, ready to swipe at a moment's notice. That hard, determined look that once was directed at Sasha, that look that was so foreign before Amphibia and is now commonplace—

No, focus! Stop staring at Anne, do your job!

She copies Anne, peeking out at the outpost. It's nothing fancy, just a regular supply depot for Andrias' robots. Armed robots man the post, staring out into the distance. In theory, these places don't have much for the rebels to use, but they replace the robots that they destroy. Taking out this outpost means fewer robots running around, at least for a little while. And right now, that's as good as they can ask for.

"Do you see any mind-controlled animals?" She asks.

"Not right now, but you never know." Anne sighs. Polly has been trying to game those collars, create some kind of disabling device that works from afar. So far, she's been unsuccessful, but she needs as many collars as they can find for further attempts. How a five-year-old managed to figure all this out, Sasha will never understand.

"Ok, here's the plan." Sasha whispers. "Try to create as little noise as possible. Take out the robots, go inside, take out anything else, then destroy the place. You got the booms?"

Anne holds out a boom shroom with a wicked smirk. "Oh yeah."

"Then let's do this!" She leaps over the log without looking behind. She doesn't need to, she knows Anne is right beside her. Not behind…beside.

How did she ever think that was how it should be…how did she ever think Anne should always be supporting her and not the other way around…?

Anne moves quietly, only calling out with a yell as she throws all of her weight into her swing. Her blade slides through air like butter, taking out the robot in a single slice. It barely even reacts as its innards fry. Sasha stabs both eyes of the other one before it sees anything. They move in a circle, going around the outpost to each set of robots and repeating their attack, moving with their line of sight to avoid detection.

"And ayooop," Anne gets one through the back of the head. "Man, this is too easy."

"A bit," Sasha agrees. They should keep it down, but she's right, this is just too simple. It's like these guys are almost lacking in AI, or whatever programming these would-be-enemies have. What did Marcy call bad guys in her games? NPCs...?

Something's not right. Her gut is flipping out again, that nauseous feeling is back, but...this time it's bad. She opens her mouth to say something, only to watch as Anne stabs a robot through the back, swinging around the hilt of her sword as she jumps, practically flying. She rounds onto the front of the robot, sending it to the ground and further into her sword with a roundhouse kick.

"Whoah! Where'd you learn to do that!?" Sasha can't help but blurt out. Her face is hot. When did it get hot? Is anyone else hot?

"Sprig taught me," Anne boasts. "What, you like it?"

Sasha plans to say something snarky, or even positive, but all that comes out is something more like a dinosaur screech. It's almost too high-pitched to be audible.

All she can do is stare at the giant, looming snake that slowly rises up to block out the sun.

"What?" Anne's got a small smile on her face, just the hint of a blush. Then it seems to click, and she turns.

"Oh." She says helpfully. "It was too easy."

The snake lunges, and both girls dive out of the way. Sasha rolls onto her back, throwing off her cape as she goes. She's had enough experience with these fights to know she'll just get caught. "Do you know what it is?" She calls to Anne. The snake dives again after her. Its fangs snap at air. They're almost as tall as she is.

"Not a clue!" Anne calls back. "Just get the collar off!" There's that look in her eyes again, that fire that Sasha nearly tried to snuff out. How could she trust her to not just...walk away? To leave Anne to her fate? How could she put her life in Sasha's hands, when it's so important, so delicate, like a butterfly's wing?

The snake lunges again. She doesn't move fast enough, still caught in her mind.

"SASHA!" And then she's being pushed out of the way. She hits the ground with an *oof*. Anne has her sword pushed up against the gnashing teeth, venom dripping from its fangs. It snarls around the sword. It snaps, and a fang grazes Anne's hand. She lets out a cry of pain.

"Anne!" Oh it did *not* just do that! Her instincts take over. She sees red. If she had those crazy anime powers, now would be the time for them to show up. But they don't, and Sasha is just human, so she runs as hard as she can, puts all of her cheerleading training to use as she manages to climb onto its back and stab the collar with both swords. With a yell, she forces the swords deeper, before pushing them apart. The collar snaps into two in an array of sparks.

Almost immediately, the snake lets go of Anne's sword. It lifts up its head and throws Sasha off too. Blinks once, twice, before vanishing back into the underbrook.

Sasha lays on the ground, gasping for breath. She just got hit with the worst shot of adrenaline, pure fear and anger. In fact, she hasn't felt that scared since...the last time she and Anne fought a giant snake.

"That was...awful." Sasha moans. How could she screw up like that? How could she let Anne down like that? She turns her head to apologize profusely—

Only to see Anne unconscious, her hair fanning out like a flower, the cut on her hand dripping with light purple venom.

Sasha's going to drill a hole into the ground with her shoes.

She's been pacing outside the infirmary for the last half hour. Each second without any news is like a throbbing pain. How could she let this happen? Why is she getting so sloppy? Did she secretly deep down want Anne to get hurt? Hurt like how she felt when they fought? Gosh, what a piece of work she is—

Her self loathing ends when Felicia steps out, her face unreadable. She holds up a hand to stop Sasha from all but pouncing. "Slow down. She'll be fine...I think."

"You *think?*"

"Well normally, this sorta stuff isn't survivable…" She rubs her chin.

She's interrupted when Wally sort of…materializes from who knows where. He tends to do that. "Turns 'ya right to stone! Your whole body immobilized forevermore!" His voice is overly dramatic.

"Paralyzed." Felicia corrects. "This species of snake has a paralyzing venom. One bite is enough for us frogs, but for a human…"

"It's not strong enough?"

Felicia shrugs. "She's not dead, so that's a good sign." *Comforting.*

"Y'know," Wally chimes in. "There's an old folk tale my Pa used to say. Called these buggers the *Smoochin' Snake*. Cuz the only way to suck out the venom was with true love's kiss! *Your lips suck the venom from their flesh!*" He gives Sasha a cheerful smile. "Good thing you're around!"

Sasha just about keels over from a heart attack. *True Love's Kiss!?* What is this, a storybook? This isn't some friendly magic cartoon where everyone lives happily ever after! And besides, isn't that an invasion of personal space? …Wait.

"Why me?" she asks.

Wally and Felicia share a look. "You know…you and Anne…" she says.

"Me and Anne…what?"

"That giant, raging crush you have on her?" Wally finishes. "Oh. Did you. Did you not know about that. Oh. My bad." he keeps adding on with every inch Sasha's face falls.

…Is this what it's like to question your entire existence? To reevaluate every interaction you've ever had, replay every mistake and emotion and thought in this new context? She's not sure what's scarier: the fact that apparently this crush on Anne is so obvious that it's common knowledge to even *Wally*, or the fact that…he might be right.

She barely even notices when they give her an apologetic pat on the arm and leave. She doesn't even blink. All she can do is think about *Anne*, Anne and her laugh, her kindness, the girl she was so desperate to hold onto at any cost, and for what? Why? This isn't normal teenage behavior. Granted, none of their situation is normal, but still! Oh frog, how did she not see it before? The way she sulked about their fights, the obsession with being a better person, someone worthy of being her…friend, gosh, is she that oblivious to her own thoughts?

"Um…Lieutenant?" She's shaken out of her thoughts by a warty hand on her shoulder, pulling her to sit down on the floor. Her knees buckle and wobble. "I heard you were…going through something?"

Sasha takes a deep breath. "Grime, I need you to be completely honest with me." She turns to face him, just a hair away from bursting into tears. "Do you think I have a crush on Anne?"

Grime blinks. Clearly, he wasn't expecting that question, nor is he sure what the right answer is. "Well, I, um—"

"I knew it!" She wails, burying her head into her knees. "Oh frog, I'm such a *loser*!" It all makes sense! She's such a wet blanket, she's so obvious! If it had been anyone else she would've seen it a mile away!

"There, there…?" Grime awkwardly pats her shoulder. He's doing a terrible job, but still better than her father ever could. "It's…ok?"

"I didn't even *know* I liked girls!" It's not like she's never dated before. She's Sasha Waybright, every boy in their grade crushed on her at some point. The way she feels about Anne is nothing like those puppy crushes. Sure, she held their hands, went on dates, hung out with them…but at the end of the day, no matter what, she never wanted to stay. She always found herself coming back to *them*. To Anne, to Marcy (one crisis at a time though). Why? What was it about those guys that was so different?

She knows she likes boys, that's not in question. But…she never really considered her girls to be…an *option.* She just kind of assumed they were her best friends, and that was that.

But maybe…maybe she always wanted more. Deep down, an emptiness churned that she always longed to fill. It felt fullest when with Anne, but never truly…complete. Maybe this is why.

Maybe she *does* have a hopeless crush on Anne.

"If I may," Grime says. "I don't think you are hopeless. But perhaps you need to listen to your gut more often about these sorts of things." He looks away. "You're very insightful Lieutenant, more than you give yourself credit for. Perhaps you should apply that to yourself sometimes as well."

Sasha smiles weakly. "Was that a genuine compliment I heard?"

"No one will ever believe you." Sasha rolls her eyes.

Well, if she's going to trust her gut…she screwed up today. She's screwed up a lot. But Anne needs her right now, needs her to fix it. And by frog, she's gonna do it. Even if it means confronting the idea of kissing Anne and how she feels way to jittery and fluttery about the idea right now—

She's got this. Totally! Definitely not about to throw up from anxiety! Without waiting for the chance to lose her nerve, she marches into the infirmary.

Anne's laying on the table. Without any context, she looks like she's just sleeping. But Anne never sleeps quietly. She tends to talk in her sleep. It's so cute…

Man, Sasha has it bad.

"Ok. I can do this. Just in and out. It's just one kiss. One little…" Oh frog, her face is already on fire. She smacks herself a few times for courage. She's got this! It's just Anne! Her best friend! Who she just realized she has a giant crush on, but it's still just Anne! Who needs to be woken up from the paralytic! Worst case scenario, nothing happens, and they never speak of it! Amphibia is weird, magic is weird, just go with it!

"Don't worry Anne," she says, lifting her friend up in her arms. "I'm gonna save you. And uh, sorry for kissing you while you're asleep." For good measure. She shuts her eyes, more like squeezes them shut.

She's got them shut so tight, she doesn't notice the open eyes, or the hand around her cape. She doesn't notice until that hand is pulling her in close, forcing their lips together.

Oh boy. Amphibia's magic sure does really pack a punch, huh? She feels all fluttery, maybe dizzy. Even…gooey. This is nothing like any middle-school boyfriend…This is nothing like *anything* she's experienced before.

Sasha opens her eyes. They almost pop out of her skull in shock, and she pulls back.

Anne's staring straight at her.

"Dude." Anne says. "That was the worst kiss ever."

Sasha rears back like she's been burned. In less than a second she's put as much space between the two of them as possible. Her whole face is on fire, no, it's a nuclear bomb, the levels of heat rival the sun. "YOU'RE AWAKE!?"

"I'm serious!" Anne struggles to sit up. Her legs are jello beneath her feet, and not because of the kiss. "That was like kissing a dead fish! Sasha, you've had boyfriends, don't tell me you did this to them too!"

"YOU WERE AWAKE THE ENTIRE TIME?"

"DON'T CHANGE THE SUBJECT!"

"Oh my frog." Sasha is going to die. She is actually going to die. She's going to kill everyone in this bunker first but then she is going to lay down and never wake up. "You were never asleep. You were just paralyzed. Why did Wally tell me—"

"You actually believed something Wally said!?" Anne's getting more and more bewildered by the minute. "Dude!"

"I panicked!" Sasha throws her hands up in the air. "He said that I had to *suck the poison out—*"

"Well that kiss sure wasn't gonna do that! *Get back here!*" Sasha can't do this. She is going to hide in a dark hole forever. "*SASHA ELIZABETH WAYBRIGHT YOU GET BACK HERE AND APOLOGIZE UNTIL I CAN MOVE AGAIN—*"

“And she just left!” Anne howls. Even ten years after it happened, the story never fails to kill her. Tears of mirth are streaming down her face. Marcy isn’t much better off, laughing so hard it’s silent. “I swear, imagine the most 3rd grade playground kiss and then she just *leaves*—”

“I was embarrassed!” Sasha wails. She buries her head in her arms while the other two cry with laughter. “I just had my bi awakening, like, two seconds ago—”

“And the first thing you did was kiss me!?” Anne almost spills her drink as she pounds the table. Her cheeks are flushed with alcohol.

“How come you never told me this story before? This is too good.” Marcy asks. She takes another sip of her drink.

“Ok ok, so I was stuck there for like another hour,” Anne continues. “And then when Sasha finally crawled out of hiding she was like, “We will never speak of this again,” and I felt so bad for her that I just agreed.”

“Honestly looking back, I’m more embarrassed that I actually believed it,” Sasha snickers. “Or maybe I was just that desperate to kiss you.”

“Probably both.”

“Yeah,” Sasha hums. “Good thing I don’t have that problem anymore.” Anne gives her shoulder a whack, but accepts the kiss to her cheek.

imposterism

written by fae
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When the clock passes midnight**,** at the end of it all, Anne can't sleep.

It's a funny feeling, with her body heavy and tired, exhausted from the emotional turmoil of it all. Void of every ache and pain, free of cuts and bruises and battered, beaten skin.

She has no scars. Her body is a canvas, empty and blank without years of struggle and hardship, no evidence to accompany the memories of bones long-broken and scabs forever healed.

She can't help but press her nails into her palm, tired eyes blurring at the faintest hint of pain.

The only pain. Physical and potent and real.

I made a copy of you right before you expired, the Guardian had said, *a backup, if you will.*

A backup. A *copy.*

She presses her dull, worn nails deeper into her skin.

A copy.

It feels hard to breathe, suddenly. Palms with crescent-shaped aches push down on soft fabric, a harsh reminder that this *is* real, in a way. At least, she *thinks* it is. The air in the shared hospital room is too cold, and yet overwhelmingly suffocating.

It *hurts* to breathe, suddenly. Pinpricks of pain behind her eyes and body heavy with a stubborn exhaustion and—

"Anne?" a voice calls, familiar and grounding in a way she so desperately craves. "Why are you awake?"

Marcy's voice is soft, in the dim light of heart monitors and the occasional nurse passerby. It sends a pang through her, emotional and devastating, and Anne can't help but curse as salt forces its way from her eyes.

There's the faint ring of a shuffle, and icy cold hands press along Anne's back, bony arms embracing her in the faint attempt of a hug.The touch brings forth a whole new set of negative emotions, on behalf of Marcy instead of herself, for better or worse. She doesn't know the full scope of what she'd gone through in Anne's absence, and Anne isn't quite sure she ever fully will. Skeleton prominent and stark against pale, bruise-like skin; blood running green instead of red…

Marcy doesn't say anything, and Anne is glad. She's happy to just sit there, peaceful, however brief it may be.

Anne heaves in desperate gulps of air as her palm reaches up to brush at the tears staining her cheeks.

"Sorry," she says, cringing at how raw her voice sounds, "I didn't mean to wake you."

"I couldn't sleep, regardless," Marcy replies, her voice heavy. "I didn't know if—I don't want *it* to come back."

Right. *It.*

Anne scoots a bit further onto her cot, adjusting the blanket to cover Marcy's legs in an attempt to fight off the violent chill of A/C.

"Do you wanna talk about it?" she asks.

"Not really," Marcy replies. Then, "Maybe. I dunno."

Calling that…thing by the name it'd chosen, stolen from the memories of Marcy in a cruel way to imitate her felt wrong. Referencing it at all felt wrong.

Almost as wrong as Anne existing in the aftermath.

There's a sudden sigh, loud and exasperated from one of the cots across the room from them, a singular blonde figure rising up and carefully creeping down to wear Anne and Marcy sit. Her breath is soft on Anne's chin as she settles, arm wrapping around her waist and head nestled in the crook of her neck.

"Marcy's not supposed to be out of her bed, you know," Sasha says, though her tone lacks any real bite. "Her chest is still healing."

"You're one to speak," Marcy replies, "you're worse off than me."

"That's a lie."

Marcy laughs, voice cracked and awkward in pitch. It's so grossly normal that Anne can't help the smile that forces its across her lips.

She doesn't want this small, brief moment to end.

Anne inhales, sharp and short. Oxygen feels like fire in her chest, heavy and burning as it passes through her throat and lips.

It comes out as a confession, almost. Too flat and lame to be considered anything great.

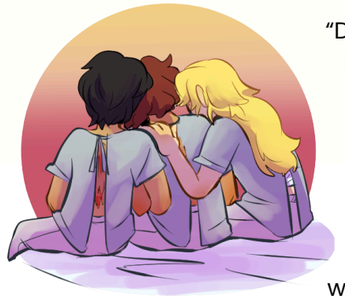
"I'm not real."

Maybe that wasn't the right phrasing. She isn't sure if she knows for certain.

She feels Marcy's breath hot on her neck as she exhales. "What?"

"I'm not—" she repeats, "I'm not Anne. Not really, I don't think."

...and the tears are spilling again, faster than she can process. It feels like a lie, on her tongue, yet the words are rooted in truth. Because how *can* this be real, when she remembers the musty scent of her basement room at the Plantar's farm so vividly, or can recall the placement of every glowing star on the ceiling of her bedroom.



"Don't be ridiculous," Sasha says, and Anne can feel her fingers brush against her skin as she moves closer, "of course you're Anne. You're here, you're *real.*"

Anne has to choke back the self-deprecating chuckle Sasha's words threaten to summon, because even Anne isn't quite sure that statement is true, and she had been the one to meet this world's fucked-up version of a god playing with its pawns.

If something is created and copied, memories and data transferred

over into an exact replica, is it really the same thing. A duplicate file is never the original, not when the computer itself forces extra numbers onto the end of the title, questioning the user if they truly want to save such a deceitful document.

"No, you don't—" Anne starts, "I'm not Anne. Not *your* Anne."

Marcy and Sasha are quiet, for a moment. For better or worse? Anne can't decide. She feels like her mind is made up of sludge, thoughts muddled into fog and forced into a glass closet, accusations of *Imposter!* and *Fake!* carved messily into the perfectly polished door.

It's Marcy who speaks first, voice soft as it cuts through the silence.

"What...What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm not...I don't think I'm still Anne, not really," she says. "The Guardian—that *thing* that sent me back here—it said it made a backup." Anne fights the flinch that springs forth as Sasha's fingertips dig deeper into her shoulder, the comforting action only eliciting sparks of pain instead of comfort.

It's real, though. Grounding.

"I died, in Amphibia. I really, *truly* died."

The confession doesn't bring forth the immeasurable dread she initially expected, moreso a soft, simmering acceptance.

She'd died there. Anne was dead, yet no one was mourning her sacrifice because *she* was here.

Saying it aloud felt cathartic, in a way. In the same way it brings forth the crushing reality of her current existence. Her current consciousness.

"Oh," Sasha says.

"I'm going to die at ninety-two," Anne notes. "The Guardian told me."

She feels both of her friends stiffen at her sides.

"You're still Anne, though," Marcy says. "Weird...spooky god nonsense doesn't

change that. It didn't with me, I don't think."

Green blood and all. Strange memories of lives long past, history foreign from human minds.

"Even if your body is new, you still have the same soul," Sasha says, "the same memories, the same morals. From every direction that matters, you are Anne."

And maybe she was. Tired, bleary thoughts about life and existence and all.

Sasha's movements are slow and gentle, as she shifts. Anne's back is pressed against the cool fabric of hospital sheets, warm figures curling protectively at her side.

The nurses would yell at them, come the next check-in. Anne couldn't find it in herself to care.

For now, all Anne wanted to do was hold her two closest friends tightly, banish the thoughts that plagued her mind, and sleep.

It's seven o'clock on Friday, and they just came from dinner. And none of them plan on buying anything, but here they are in the dusty carpeted thrift store aisles. It's not *the* thrift store, but it's *a* thrift store, which Marcy decides must be the origin of this lifelong curse against good decisions. She's browsing the colored glassware on one shelf, eyeing the stains in the silverware on the shelf below, when Sasha's arm shoots out to catch her in her idle path.

"Anne," she says, because she's also flung out her other arm, to stop their third.

"What?" Anne replies, annoyed, because she's actually looking for kitchenware for her new apartment.

"Look." The arm blocking Marcy changes positions, pointing towards the cash register. And at the white-painted pegboard spanning the wall behind it, the cracking, antique photo frames, the—

"Buy one, get one half-off," Anne reads, from the laminated sign. It hangs flimsily beneath a mounted wooden display that holds twin three-foot, medieval-style broadsword replicas.

"Anne," Sasha says again. Hand on Anne's shoulder, she jostles her side-to-side. She's smiling like a kid in a toy store.

"What?" Anne says again. But her voice is smoother, on the verge of teasing. She meets Sasha's eyes. One corner of her mouth twitches upwards.

Sasha shrugs. "It's a good sale."

"I'm looking for dishes."

"A sword is like a knife, kind of." Sasha's arm creeps across her shoulders. She pulls Anne closer to her. "It could also be decor. And entertainment. Multifunctional."

Anne doesn't respond, arms crossed, eyebrows raised.

"Okay. I see you're hesitant." Sasha toys with the tie of Anne's tank top strap. "What if you only had to pay for the half-off one?"

Anne sighs. Her head tilts towards Sasha, and she laughs, eyes fixed on the floor. "What do you think, Marcy?"

Marcy blinks, having momentarily forgotten she was here. "Um." What she thinks is that this isn't the type of conundrum that can be solved by 'thinking.' *She* certainly isn't. Where her adult sense of reason should be, she feels a distant spark of ravenous curiosity. "You should do whatever you want."

In light of that non-answer, Anne and Sasha share a look. Sasha smiles again, mischievous and daring, and it catches on like a contagion, because then Anne smiles back.

"Well, I guess we do have time to kill."

And, hopefully, not each other. But that's a lot to ask, Marcy understands. As they begin walking, she remembers the miniature first aid kit she shoved into Sasha's glove compartment last month, claiming she didn't need *another* one, and that small echo of adult rationality feels a little bit better.

It's seven-twenty, and Marcy is sitting on the hood of Sasha's parked car. She sips from the half-empty cup she'd forgotten in the cupholder after dinner, and found again during the short drive from the thrift store. Whatever drink she got is so watered down she can't even tell what it's supposed to be anymore.

Anne and Sasha stand opposite each other in preparation, equipped with their lightly-used swords, spread out across two of the empty parking lot spaces. Sasha had relocated them to this deserted concrete plain, home long ago to shoppers visiting the supermarket in the distance, now dilapidated, buckling under its own weight. Abandoned for years, weeds poke through the crumbling pavement under their feet. The old store is dull and gray and monotone, backlit by the brilliant, orange-yellow beginnings of sunset.

Marcy adjusts the sunglasses atop her head. Sasha's, given to her as the three of them climbed out of the car.

"Hold these," she'd said, taking them from her own eyes and presenting them to Marcy. And at that point she already had a sword in her other hand, so Marcy didn't argue.

Now standing in front of her on their impromptu sparring grounds, Sasha tests the weight of the blade. She turns it over and back, swings it a few times. Sunlight shines off the few parts of the metal not worn dull with age.

Anne, standing about ten feet parallel to her opponent, appears to be tracing a crack in the pavement with her sword.

"Are you, like, gonna warm up at all?" Sasha props her sword up on her shoulder.

"Nah." Anne puts her hands on her hips (the blade dangles dangerously close to her legs) and stretches her back. She straightens, declaring, "I winged it back then, and I'll wing it now."

"Okay, but I'm not gonna go easy on you this time."

Anne's nose scrunches with amusement. "Yes you will."

As they both get into position, Marcy takes a long, hard look at Sasha, and thinks to herself: *Yeah, she will.*

A pause. Anne and Sasha stare each other down. Marcy waits.

And waits.

And realizes: "Oh! Do you want me to say go?"

"If you wouldn't mind," says Anne, eyes locked ahead.

Marcy takes another, contemplative sip of her drink. "Okay," she says, and sets the cup in her lap. "Go."

And it's like they felt her say it before they heard. Anne and Sasha come together with a metallic flash, a blur of movement. Sasha strikes first, lithe and dangerous. It's obvious Anne is surprised. She stumbles, flinching, but brings her blade up solidly to block the blow. She jumps back, reorients herself.

"Oh, wow." Sasha tosses her blade so it spins in midair, and catches it without looking. "You're out of practice."

Anne huffs. "That's what you think." And lunges, aiming low. Sasha blocks, easily, but it's clear that Anne's competitiveness has kicked in. She counters, sharper, more forceful, and a smile pulls at her lips. Their swords clash again, metal-on-metal, and the fight takes on a renewed, ravenous energy.

Marcy doesn't exactly follow. She could, if she wanted to—she's read and written and drawn and lived through enough fantasy stories to understand a thing or two about swordplay. But it's different, when Sasha and Anne do it, because they move with an artistry that her brain doesn't try to immediately dissect. Something that makes her want to see all of them, everything they're doing, instead of the parts of a whole. They just look nice. Aesthetically pleasing. If she could capture a single moment from this, document the slope of Anne's shoulders, the position of Sasha's arms, their expressions…

Maybe she is dissecting it. Instead of dissecting the other thing, that is. The big, obvious, stupid thing. She places her cheek in her hand, and is unsurprised that her face is warm.

In front of her, Sasha makes a dramatic strike from above, which becomes a very impressive feint, a jab at Anne's chest. Anne knocks it aside, reflexes needle-sharp and accurate. She steps back, then forward, into a jab of her own.

Sasha stops her. The blades' worn metal scrapes together with an unpleasant noise. They fall into a position of equal tension on both sides, chests heaving, looking each other in the eyes.

"Hey, you remembered what you're doing." Sasha's hair hangs in her face. She smiles. "Took you a minute, but y'know. Good job."

Anne's arms shake. "You're gonna look really stupid—" She breathes. "—when you lose."

"Oh. Are you not forfeiting? I thought that was what this was."

Anne makes a noise like a growl, and pushes forward. Sasha pushes back. Her eyebrows furrow, and her lips lilt into a self-satisfied smirk.

"Ugh, don't make that f—"

Sasha cuts her off. She pushes abruptly on her sword, leans forward, and—Marcy feels a jolt of surprise through her chest—plants her lips squarely on Anne's.

Anne makes a muffled, alarmed noise in her throat, eyes blown wide. She stumbles backward. Sasha nudges Anne's sword with hers, and it goes clattering to the ground. Anne's hands fly up to her mouth. Sasha levels the remaining sword at her chest.

"Look at that. Still got it."

Anne sputters, red-faced. "That—that was not fair!"

"What? Was there a rule against it?"

"You—you *know*—That's not the kind of—" She stifles a frustrated yell. "Can we *please* get the ref in here?"

They both look at Marcy. In a daze of confusion, she blinks, and points to herself. Sasha nods.

She slides off the car, planting unsteady feet on the crumbling parking lot. Her drink slides off after her, because she'd set it next to her before getting down, and the hood is curved, and wow, she really isn't thinking str—

Fingers snap in front of her face. "Marcy," Sasha says. "What are you doing?"

"Um. Referee-ing." And there's a question: what does a referee do, anyways? Marcy doesn't watch sports. She looks between her friends, assessing the damage. "Well neither of you are hurt, so that's good."

"I'm *emotionally* damaged." Anne crosses her arms.

"Come on, 'damaged'? That's a little insulting," Sasha says.

"Well—Sasha," Marcy says. "Most people find being—um—" Her face feels hot again. "Kissed without warning sort of. Y'know. It's not necessarily y—"

"No," Anne says. "It is you. Stop shielding her ego, Marcy."

"God, fine," Sasha huffs, throwing her hands (and sword) up in the air and stepping away. "Next time I'll just kill you."

"Thank you." Anne turns away with a smug sigh, and holds up her chin.

The silence that follows is one of the strangest and most off-kilter Marcy has ever felt. The image of Sasha lunging forward, kissing Anne, replays in her mind more times than seems necessary or, frankly, acceptable, and she's honestly starting to feel a little guilty about it.

But then Sasha says, "You *are* joking, right?" in a tone just too quiet to be ironic, and Marcy feels less weird in comparison.

Anne blinks, turns around, and gives her an appropriately strange look. This silence is shorter, but much harder to sit through. The sun dips the smallest, most imperceptible amount, slicing across the horizon in vivid red and orange.

And then Anne snorts, breaking into sudden and infectious laughter. She covers her face with her hand, wandering back in their direction with the sun shining behind her. Briefly, Sasha and Marcy meet each other's gaze, and come to some fraction of understanding, and look back at her.

Eyes alight with exhilaration, Anne sighs. "Alright. I think I'm done." She runs a hand through her hair.

"Aw, what?" Sasha's sword arm drops. "We were just getting started."

"Hm. Guess we'll have to pick it up another time." Anne winks.

For the first time that evening, Sasha struggles for a response, and gives up.

And here, in the apparent wake of it all, is where Anne makes her mistake. "Marce, could you get that for me?" She motions to the sword that'd been knocked out of her hands. It lies a foot from Marcy's shoes, closer to her than either of them.

"Sure." She bends down to grab the handle, stands, and takes a single step forward.

Inevitably, she succumbs once again to her greatest and most ancient weakness. She trips over a rock.

More technically, a loose piece of asphalt. But that doesn't matter, because she's falling, throwing her arms out instinctually to steady herself, despite the fact that this has never once worked. Despite the fact that she is holding a sharp and dangerous object, and in fact making it more sharp and dangerous by swinging it.

True to her nature and lack of forethought at seeing a troubled friend, Anne rushes in to help. And is promptly stabbed in the face.

"Oh my god, Marcy. You didn't *stab* me."

"Yes I did! You were wounded by a sharp weapon that I was holding. I, by definition, stabbed you." Marcy grips her hand, back rigid against the front-left tire of Sasha's car.

"Yeah, but it's not like a *wound* wound. This is just a normal wound. A baby wound."

Sasha adjusts, kneeling closer. "As long as you stop moving, sure." She holds the disinfectant-soaked cotton ball to Anne's cheek. At the first sight of blood, she'd rushed to the glove compartment. Marcy was grateful someone remembered. She'd been too freaked out and apologetic to think.

Anne barely winces, as her wound of debatable infancy is cleaned out. She looks at Marcy. "I'm fine, okay? This is nothing."

Because, of course, she's had worse.

"And, hey," She tries again, with a new note of urgency at the reaction. She runs her thumb over the faded scar on Marcy's chin. "I've got one to match you guys', now!"

Marcy laughs, weakly. Her head drops onto Anne's shoulder. "You already have enough," she mutters. To which Anne silently concedes.

The sun sets. Sasha shuffles through the plastic first aid kit compartments. She applies the antibiotic, smooths the bandage onto Anne's cheek. When she's done, she snaps the kit's latches closed, and sits down on Anne's other side.

A moment passes. "I guess," Anne whispers. "Uh, I guess we should head home now."

"Sorry we didn't find anything for your apartment," Sasha says.

"Yeah. I mean—it was entirely your fault, so yeah."

"Marcy encouraged it." Sasha shrugs.

Marcy hums, acknowledging. Because mostly she's preoccupied staring at them. Sunset warming their faces, sparkling in their eyes. For two people who were just fighting, they look perfect at each other's side.

And hers. Maybe. Possibly. If that counts for anything.

Anne's smile fades. "It's not...that I really care about having *stuff.* Y'know?" She clears her throat. "But the apartment—it's so new, and it's the first time I've lived alone in a while, and—it gets lonely, I guess."

Over her shoulders, Sasha and Marcy share another glance.

"Um," Marcy begins, hesitant. "Maybe...we could make it less lonely tonight. If you wanted."

"Oh," Anne breathes. "That would be nice."

"Would it?" It's been years since they've had anything resembling a sleepover. Marcy feels immature, even thinking that word.

"It's Friday," Sasha says. "We could help you actually look for things tomorrow."

Anne lets out a single laugh. "You promise not to get distracted?"

“Cross my heart.”

“You’re embarrassing.” Anne sinks against Sasha’s side. She motions for Marcy to join them.

And she does. As the sun breaches the horizon, as the first purple shadows of nighttime stretch across the sky, she settles next to Anne, lets her wrap an arm around her shoulders. She closes her eyes, focuses on the shifting weight in the air, the subtle dip in temperature.

There are several things she could say. That she will say, someday soon. *I’m so glad I’m with you guys* and *I love you* and *You two should take up fencing, or something.* But she doesn’t say all that yet. She opens her eyes, and looks ahead. They’re here. They’re together. That’s enough.

There’s something about that particular thought, maybe, that gives Marcy the confidence to do what she does next. She sits up against the side of the car, holds onto the hand Anne’s draped over her shoulder, and kisses her right above the bandage.

No one seems all that surprised. Sasha raises an amused eyebrow. Anne twines their fingers tighter together, but gives no verbal input.

“Sounds like a plan,” Marcy says, settling down again. “But let’s steer clear of thrift stores for a bit, okay?” She’d rather not jinx it.

Flowers won't grow back here for a while.

Anne had done what she could to save the withering fields of Wartwood, the harvest that almost never was—but it seems there's still a limit to her power. Maybe all the toads' fighting has scared the gentle roots into hiding for one more year. Maybe they're waiting for the time they won't be trampled on by war boots, or breathe in polluted air—a time when they can flourish and mark the start of something new and better.

Anne can't exactly blame them. If she could, she would also hide underground and never come out until it's safe—maybe with the rest of her friends from Wartwood, who she hasn't seen since she was a little girl. The only issue is, Amphibia will never be safe until she *makes* it safe, and that's why only danger and calamity drives her back to Wartwood these days. *Angel of death*, they've come to call her, the easy playfulness and curious yet fond looks she'd always gotten as a kid superseded by fear and reverence.

Anne sometimes wishes no one had ever found out she was a god. It would mean Wartwood having no one to protect it, so she usually just berates herself for being selfish—but it would also mean she could be scared with everyone else, maybe huddled around the fire telling each other ridiculously spooky stories to get their minds off whatever was going on outside, and she wouldn't be alone.

She still has the Plantars, at least. Following her to the Order of the Temple had been their choice, and one she was immensely grateful for—she isn't sure she would have been able to survive her training without them, even with Valeriana's patient encouragement—but she feels bad for drawing them away from their home, and their presence still doesn't cure her specific brand of loneliness.

We're humans, Sasha's voice screams inside her head, the heat of battle getting to them both—playful sparring and wry counteroffers of alliance quickly turning into attempts to draw blood. *There's no one like us. We don't belong here.*

When Anne found out there were more people like her in Amphibia, she was ecstatic for all of two seconds before realizing that they were the reason her family was in danger—the reason Anne was needed at all. And then she met Sasha, and as much as she'd desperately wished to be wrong about her, to be able to get her on her side, maybe, so Anne could have an ally, her worst suspicions were confirmed when Sasha showed up in full battle armor with the toads and tried to lay waste to Wartwood—specifically to lure her out of hiding. For Sasha, you see, had a proposal for her.

I am not your enemy, the goddess of Strength says in her memory, infusing her sword with an amount of magical power that seems to directly contradict her statement. *We don't need to fix their problems for them. We can solve this peacefully. Meet us at the temple in Newtopia, and we'll talk.*

Anne remembers wanting to believe her *so* bad. Accepting, even, to show up at the temple to figure out if peace talks were actually possible, to imagine a world where she could forget all about her responsibilities—but Sasha just *had* to push it even further.

They're just frogs, Anne. They don't matter.

That, alone, pissed Anne off. Sasha might have had the obvious advantage in their fight, but Anne could keep fighting *forever*, her magic healing her the second Sasha's sword grazes her skin.

Heart magic may not be good for much, but it works *wonders* for Anne's resolve. She infuses her own sword with it, and slashes blindly across Sasha's face.

They're my friends.

She doesn't exactly care for where it lands, as long as it leaves a permanent mark. And then it does, blood gushing out of the wound she carved into Sasha's cheek, and she can only think, as if in a daze: *Pretty*.

It's this feeling of shame over the improper use of her powers that pushes her off her knees, amid the crops she managed to regrow and the flowers she couldn't.

Some goddess she is.

"So, how was she?" the goddess of Wit speaks as soon as Sasha is back in her room at Toad Tower. "The third human?"

The side of Sasha's face is still leaking blood, even through the bandage Grime had applied, and she looks like she's been chewed, spat out, and trampled on

once more for good measure, so Marcy's question is pretty stupid—but Sasha will forgive her, as Marcy can't see her right now. Her tiredness, along with the relief of being back home, must have lowered Sasha's defenses and accidentally opened telepathic communication with Marcy, who she *knows* is always hovering at the edge of her mind, waiting to overwhelm her with senseless chatter.

There's nothing Sasha wants more than to drop down and fall into bed, but here starts the tedious process of taking off her armor. She tried sleeping with it still on, once, and it wasn't fun, so she starts with the fur cape. As majestic and warrior princess-like as it is, it's also very much a hassle at times like these.

"You were right about her," Sasha just says. "She wasn't as easy to convince as I thought she would be."

Marcy tuts in the back of her mind. "You weren't either, I recall."

"I still don't have any reason to believe you," Sasha throws back, though at this point, both her and Marcy know it's a lie. It's true that, objectively, she should not trust Marcy—she is Sasha's enemy, as is all of Newtopia, and they've done nothing but foil each other's plans for years; but she also could have ratted Sasha out long ago, and she didn't, meaning Marcy afforded her *some* measure of protection despite Sasha trying to bring Newtopia down, and this weird relationship of theirs where they've never even met each other but know everything *about* each other is the closest thing to friendship Sasha has ever felt. "And I will never give up my powers unless we *all* do. I'm not leaving the toads defenseless."

Instead of trying to draw Sasha in with more talks of the three temples, and weaving tales of the life that awaits them once the three of them are just normal girls, and how surely once the calamity powers are gone the conflict between frogs, newts and toads will also spontaneously cease, Marcy inquires, without missing a beat:

"Was she lonely, too?"

Sasha thinks of Anne's resolve—the protectiveness that kicked in the moment Sasha mentioned the frogs. You could tell Anne cared immensely about them and about her role as their appointed, prophesied protector—but still, for a moment, she'd hesitated.

"I think so," she eventually says, indirectly admitting the unspoken—that Sasha felt lonely, too, that they all did. It's hard not to, when you grow up worshipped by people who don't look a thing like you and the only beings who could possibly understand you are your sworn enemies in a war that's been going on for a thousand years now, and that you haven't started.

Amphibia wasn't without conflict before the three of them showed up, too young to remember a time before it—but the moment they did, their respective factions, perhaps only kept docile by powerlessness, had jumped at the chance to have the upper hand, creating a three-way, full-out war where before the conflict was nothing more than an unspoken understanding.

As a little girl, Sasha had loved all the attention, the importance, and the chanting in her name—but now, at sixteen, she's tired. She wants to lay her arms down, though she can't, and she's sure the other girls feel the same—that is their paradox.

"Even if neither of you wants to give up your powers," Marcy says, "we *are* stronger together. When used in tandem, our powers will be enough to end this war for good."

Sasha raises an eyebrow at that. "The war was started by the newts."

"Petty territorial disputes."

"So you're ready to discuss terms?"

"A compromise," Marcy states. "No one else needs to get hurt."

Sasha thinks this is all well and good—*in theory*—but the elephant in the room, the reason for all of their fighting, the person who's had the power to call all of this off since it began and never did, still needs to be addressed. "Is the king okay with that?"

There's a beat of suspense on the other end, and a crackling tension that always seems to imply something off about Marcy's powers. While she's not using her mind control right *now*, her intentions don't seem to be fully pure, either.

"The king wants nothing more than for the calamity powers to be in harmony again."

Sasha scoffs. She thinks of Grime and how mad he was when he found out Sasha had agreed to meet with Newtopia without consulting him first. He's never liked her speaking with Marcy in the first place, and always insisted her weakness for the girl would be used against her, one day.

And hadn't she hesitated with Anne, too, after all, giving someone she'd never even spoken to before the means to hurt her? What would happen if she was forced to hurt Marcy—not with her usual brags and taunts, but directly—and she couldn't do it?

But Sasha isn't one to turn her back on the people who trusted in her. She just has to trust Grime to know that, as well.

Things had started out *so well*.

For the first time in her life, when Marcy walked into the dimly lit temple, she was just a weird creature in a room full of other weird creatures. The newts were mostly used to her running around the castle, but old habits still die hard, so even her servants would sometimes still bow to her, or recoil in fear. Newtopian society was still extremely status-based, so she couldn't hold it against them—but when she got to the front of the room, where Anne and Sasha were, she did something that was both very un-Newtopian and very ungodly and rushed over to the two humans to hug them tight.

Sasha first, immediately recognizable both because of her magical aura—her armor giving off the same bright pink glow, flames radiating from her core like she was a scorching sun. Sasha barely hugged her back—in fact, she was quite stiff; unsurprising, given the formal nature of the event and how improper Marcy was acting—but even when she pulled away, her eyes didn't betray a single spark of the fondness Marcy was expecting.

Anne next—and if Sasha was hardened, everything about Anne screamed soft. There was no magic radiating from her like Sasha—probably how she managed to stay hidden all those years—but the only thing Marcy could think of was *she wasn't made for this.* With her long shawl and the flowy hair, she looked more like one of those maidens whose sacrifice seemed to be essential to so many ancient spells rather than a warrior. Marcy saw the hours this girl spent under the sun, singing and dancing on the porch with her frog family, snapshots of happiness

before the quaint little town gave way to underground tunnels and ritual chanting and oh—her aura was light blue.

Anne immediately put distance between them, horrified, like she'd been shocked.

"I knew it," Marcy meant to whisper, but she couldn't really contain her enthusiasm, and so she must have come off way too intense. "My powers are responding to yours."

"The most powerful renewable source there is," Andrias called it, from his place on the throne.

It didn't take much for their discussions to take a wrong turn after that.

"Newtopian technology supports the entire land, but it does need to be fueled," he's saying now. "With your powers renounced and the calamity box recharged, it would be a piece of cake."

Said calamity box is on a pedestal next to the throne, its gems all grayed out. Marcy keeps looking at Anne expectantly, but Anne turns her head to glance at it instead, the candle light casting shadows all over her nose and chin. "Your *technology*? That's what this is about?"

Marcy remembers her many failed attempts to provide, on her own, what Newtopia needed to function, and the days she had to spend in bed, unconscious, recovering from it. Andrias had taken her in, clothed her, made her the most important person in the land—he did so much for her, and her powers were still too weak to be of any use to him. No matter how many books she read, or how much she trained—the other humans were her only hope.

"Anne, don't you see? This isn't just about technology." Marcy dares to take her hands, cherishing their warmth. "We're talking portals, discovering new worlds, maybe—maybe even going back home. We'll be free, and we won't be alone anymore. Now that you're here, it's all in our reach. Don't you want that?"

Anne, apparently, does not want that. Anne, in fact, wrenches her hands away again and backs up with how much she *doesn't* want that.

Even in her isolation, Anne has her frog family; Anne is beloved; Anne won't give that up for anything.

But she *knows* someone else will. And so she turns around to face the other girl: "Sasha, don't you—"

There's a knife right at the end of her field of vision. Sasha's holding it, and it's coming right at her.

The idea that there shouldn't be any knives at all in the room, that Andrias and the Newtopian guards must have searched everyone before letting them in, barely crosses her mind before she has to react. She doesn't want to hurt Sasha, though. On pure instinct, she sends out a blast that hits Sasha square in the chest and traps her against the wall, invisible bonds surrounding her. Her knife clatters away on the floor, out of reach.

"Sasha, what—"

She can't finish the question, self-explanatory as it is, because Anne seems to want to take advantage of her distraction, and possibly of Sasha being immobilized, as well. She doesn't have weapons on her, but it's not like she needs them—her magic is more powerful than Sasha and Marcy's combined, and it's poised to kill. It can't get past the bonds Marcy has placed around Sasha, though Anne *really* tries to break them; but she does manage to singe a lock of Marcy's hair, and some of the electricity coming out of her palms reaches the ground under Marcy's feet and shocks her—so Marcy has to blast her against the wall too, panting and nearly falling over from the exertion.

"It's *our* land you're polluting, *my* people that you're keeping downtrodden, even though we don't get *any* of your stupid technology." Anne shouts, fighting against the bonds. "I won't give up the powers I use to protect my people, nor will I be your battery for the rest of my life. I'm ending this war here, if it kills me."

Sasha hangs her head forward, guilty but not regretful. "The toads can no longer bow to the newts. I'm sorry."

Their emotions are coming off of them so strong, filling the room and mixing with Marcy's own. It's giving her a headache; it's making her nauseous. Anne and Sasha were supposed to listen to her, to understand that being together was the only right thing to do. Not even Sasha, who she thought would be on her side—

I'm sorry, Sasha says again, almost drowned out by Anne's anger and Marcy's own turmoil. *I can't be weak.*

Andrias finally gets up from his throne. Marcy had nearly forgotten he was there, and he must have seen everything, so she foolishly reassures him: "I'm fine. They barely touched me."

He walks calmly to the place Sasha's knife is, and picks it up.

"Good job," he says. "You were the only one who could do it."

And, after weighting it in his hands for a bit as he strolls casually to Marcy, he holds it right up and sticks it into her heart.

As she falls down, too many things happen at once.

First: the pain obscures her vision, burns away her nerves, and dulls all of her senses, so she doubts, for a moment, that anything that follows is real.

"I really am sorry, Marcy," he says, right at the edge of her hearing—the very last thing to fade. She can hear no displeasure from him, and no regret. "But I need *all* of your powers."

She wants to plead, wants to beg *I would have given them to you, I would have*; but her head is a mess of far-away screams and frantic voices and flickering lights.

Don't worry, his voice booms out, regardless. *They're next.*

And that's where the problem lay, right? Marcy never would have let him.

Second: the roof starts caving in. It's not her powers that do it, nor a random, fortuitous natural disaster, because the twin pink and blue blasts of magic flit across her vision even as it starts going dark. At one point, as the temple crumbles around them, she loses sight of Andrias.

Third: she's woken up after what feels like seconds, but might've been several minutes or even hours. This is noteworthy because, honestly, when she lost consciousness, Marcy didn't think she'd ever regain it, and because Anne and Sasha are free from her bonds, though rough and battered.

Their hands are on her heart, providing a strange warmth and light. They're healing her, she realizes. No; they're bringing her back.

Andrias lies a few feet away from them, dead or possibly just knocked out. It doesn't matter. They're stronger together, after all. They'll take care of this, too.

"Let's fix Amphibia, okay?" Anne says, sending even more healing energy into her body. "Together."

Marcy looks at them in turn—Anne's patient eyes, Sasha's distraught expression as she holds her, and finds that, if the gods of Amphibia ever did speak, this was exactly what they wanted for them.

With great effort, she lifts the hand at her side and lays it over their own.

Divine Soul Sorcerer 3
Legendary Sorcery — Divine Soul
Divine Soul
A Divine Soul Sorcerer [◇] is a brutal and strong archetype favored by the gods.
3/3

a tale of divinity and daring

written by rana
title page and spot art by mood-owl

a note from the author

hello!! thank you for reading my fic—this fic is about C&C, the Amphibia-verse version of D&D, and how i imagine our favourite girls might use it to work through some of their emotions in a fun and healthy environment :> mostly, it's just silly! i hope you enjoy c:

warnings for:

descriptions of battle/non-graphic death

∞

"I don't…know which class to pick." Anne groans, shutting her copy of the C&C *Player's Handbook* with distaste. "There's so many. They're so confusing."

"There's another one in *Tasha's*!" Marcy pipes up excitedly. "I'm doing a multiclass with that one, actually."

Sasha shrugs. "I'm playing a barbarian. A good ol' human. Figure you two probably have some fantasy characters, keeping it nice and simple."

"OOO, if you play a Variant Human you get a bonus feat outside of ability score improvements! You don't get the +1 to all stats but that never really made sense to me and an extra feat is *so* much better especially if you take a half-feat so you're basically forfeiting an ASI for a feat at *first level,* which is amazing." Marcy gushes. "Ohhhh, but barbarians usually don't wear armour, I thought you wanted that?"

"Yeah…it's bullshit." Sasha agrees. "But it's fine, my gal doesn't need any cool as fuck armour, she's got her muscles, she'll be fine. Also I really like the rage feature."

"Oh hell yeah! Do you know anything else about her yet?" Marcy asks, excitedly.

Sasha straightens a bit, due to this being her first time introducing her character.

"She's Brünnhilde Bloodstriker, a Path of the Ancestral Guardians human barbarian. Her path allows her clan, who were all brutally slaughtered in an orc raid, to fight alongside her still."

"Brünnhilde Bloodstriker…that's a really cool name…" Marcy marvels aloud.

Sasha turns bright red. "It's. It's not from a bedtime story from my mom, I *swear*."

Anne raises an eyebrow, but Marcy just pulls out their own character sheet. She's decided to play a DMPC since only two PCs would be really difficult for balance.

"I'm playing a non-binary Swashbuckler rogue/Battlemaster artificer Eladrin elf named Mazariah!"

"Wait, Eladrin are like…the seasonal fey elves right?" Anne asks, remembering reading something about them.

"Heck yeah they are!"

"That's cool as fuck." Anne absent-mindedly rolls a d20. "I think I'm gonna play an Aasimar divine soul sorcerer named Amara. The rest of her family is completely normal, but Amara was heavenly since birth, blessed with divine powers—and cool wings—that made her feel like she was destined to be a hero."

"Aaaaaaaa oh my frogs I *can't* believe we finally have a party!" Marcy squeals, and she pulls the other two into a tight hug.

"Sasha, WHY DO YOU KEEP TRYING TO MURDER BRÜNNHILDE I SWEAR—" Anne looks like she's about to strangle her friend.

"IT'S WHAT BRÜNNHILDE WOULD DO! SHE PROTECTS HER FRIENDS!"

"YOU CAN PROTECT YOURSELF IN OTHER WAYS THAN BEING A *COMPLETE* DUMBASS!"

"IT'S FINE I ROLLED A NATURAL 20 ON DEATH SAVES SO SHE'S BACK UP AGAIN!"

Marcy groans. "*Sasha,* you were supposed to keep your death saves secret so Brünnhilde could dramatically rise from the dead…."

"Sorry, Marce, I may have gotten carried away…" Sasha says, embarrassed.

Anne sighs. “And *I’m* sorry for yelling. It’s just. We’re all heroes, okay? The rest of us can fight, too. You can trust in Amara and Mazariah.”

“Yeah. Of course, you’re right. I’m sorry.”

“We should *not* have trusted in Mazariah.” Sasha says, panting from exertion as if she were Brünnhilde herself.

Mazariah had just *literally* stabbed Amara in the back. With their blend of artificer infusions and sneak attack damage, as well as the fact Amara hadn’t thought to cast Mage Armour because she was literally just enjoying her time with her friends, Amara fell unconscious instantly and Brünnhilde was left to face Mazariah alone.

She’d won, but Mazariah had fled, and now she was administering a healing potion to Amara in order to revive her.

“What—what happened?”

*Brünnhilde grimaces. “Mazariah’s a traitor. They stabbed you in the back and you nearly fucking **died,** and then **I** nearly fucking died trying to stablize you.”*

*“That—no, that can’t be right, they’ve—it **must** be possession or a charm effect or…” Amara trails off.*

“Marcyyyyy, could I make an Insight check?”

“On Brünnhilde?”

“No, on Mazariah—was there anything *off* about them before they stabbed me?”

“Oooooo, interesting, go ahead and roll.”

“That’s a 24.”

“Holy frogs. Okay, so you seem to recall a memory…”

The three of them were resting in a tavern.

“Hey, Maz, why are your eyes purple? Is that an Eladrin thing?” Brünnhilde asks, in curiousity.

“Oh. They used to be hazel. More green when I’m spring and summer, and more brown when I’m autumn and winter. But…it changed?” Mazariah looks confused at this. “I…it’s probably some experiment. It’s been like this since…just before I enlisted y’all on our first adventure, actually!”

On their neck, a purple sigil glows faintly. Brünnhilde and Amara both guess it’s a trick of the light, or maybe they’re practicing runes.

“That wasn’t a trick of the light. Maz has been cursed by *Solana* ever since we met them.” Amara realizes.

“Shit. The evil one, right?” Sasha asks.

“Yeah, the evil one. Who uses purple magic and sigils…how did we miss this.”

“I’m not sure..” Sasha yawns.

“Heck, how long have we been playing?” Marcy glances at her watch, and gulps. “Okay, I think my parents may *actually* murder me if I don’t stop the session now but um. Sorry to drop all that on you about losing Maz—”

“What do you mean, losing Maz?” Sasha cuts in. “We’re *obviously* gonna go break the sigil and save them next session.”

Anne nods determinedly. “Yep! Better prep for that, Mar-Mar! We’re saving our friend.”

“But—you’ve only *known* Maz as their cursed, possessed self.”

“Aaaaaand we’re giving them a chance to show us who they truly are! If they’re a jerk at heart Brünnhilde will probably bash their head in anyways.”

“Can confirm.” Sasha grins. Marcy looks down at their DM screen, with an odd expression on her face. “Anyways, goodnight y’all, my mom will probably get worried if I don’t leave now!”

They all say goodnight and head either home or upstairs. It takes Marcy longer than usual to fall asleep, her mind full of many thoughts.

Brünnhilde glances between her allies and the two enemies that surround them. Her friends are bloodied and bruised, with Amara's mage armour flickering in and out of existence, and a green-eyed Mazariah looking on the brink of unconsciousness. She knows she can't get through Solana's defenses as well as they can, but she ***can*** *take down their other opponent, Solana's brute force ally. She sheathes her swords. She nods at a bewildered Amara and Mazariah. And then, Brünnhilde jumps forward, tackling their enemy and leaping with them right off the cliff, falling down to the great expanse below.*

"Wait. Are you *sure* you want to do this?" Marcy questions, while Anne looks absolutely flabbergasted. "He got a nat 1 on his athletics check, you can grapple him easily, but you're still. Falling. I'll forfeit our extra homebrew fall damage because of the fact his body will cushion you, but it's still 30d6. At your health this is enough to *kill you outright*, and if not you have no way to get back up and you're leaving everything up to Amara and Mazariah."

Sasha nods solemnly. "I'm still in rage, and fall's bludgeoning, right?"

"Yep. So it'd be—"

"Halved. You two have enough spell slots to get Solana—well, Mazariah doesn't, but their Dragonwing crossbow has been really helpful so far in distracting that bitch. Amara can go in for the kill, if she just holds concentration on Mage Armour—and I still have an inspiration that I could give to her if she doesn't."

"You really thought this through, huh?"

"Wasn't the leader of the Rebellion for my *lack* of planning skills." Sasha grins. Then she fiddles with her hands. "Besides...I trust you guys. Brünnhilde trusts you guys."

"Aww, Sash." Anne smiles. "Don't worry, Amara will fight for Brünnhilde's honour like Brünnhilde always fights for ours."

Marcy grimaces. "Okay, fall damage...Wait, what am I saying. Mazariah uses their reaction to cast *feather fall*, ensuring that Brünnhilde takes no fall damage."

"*Thank* you. I didn't wanna mess up your spell slot game but was *really* hoping you'd do that." Sasha sighs. "Your dice have been really mean and even with the rage reduction you might've killed her outright."

"Well, you're not even unconscious now! Brünnhilde is out of the fight, though—since you're still in rage, I'll allow the ancestral guardians to remain, and 'cause that was really cool and you already have inspiration, I'll allow you to forfeit the usual restrictions on Spirit Shield."

"Fuck yeah! You're an awesome DM, Mar Mar."

Marcy flushes, and then stammers. "I-It's nothing, heh, it's the p-players that make the experience so cool."

Anne raises an eyebrow, and then checks her notes. "Speaking of cool...I'm next on initiative, right?"

*A scream tears its way out of Amara's throat as Brünnhilde leaps off. Mazariah murmurs something in Sylvan, and a familiar green magical energy surrounds Brünnhilde. The valkyrie spirits around them don't fade away, and Amara can breathe again. But a rage not unlike her—****friend's****—fills her, and she turns her gaze on Solana.*

"You have hurt enough people, Solana of the Rotyasdians. Your corruption will come to an end today." Amara says, loud and clear, before she closes her eyes and when they snap open, they're a bright, glowing blue, with her curly hair flowing around her. She reaches her hand forward and ***twists*** *it, and then a loud, ringing sound suddenly erupts right next to Solana, who places her hands over her ears in agony.*

"Okay, I know that there's specifics about the spell...*however*...You know how you said you'd let us bend the rules to be cool?" Anne starts, waiting for Marcy's response.

"Tell me." Marcy's eyes sparkle. There's nothing she loves more than players being creative; it's in the *Cavern Master's Guide* that you should only use the rules as a starting point, anyways!

"Well. A creature made of crystal would shatter, most likely—so what about a creature that's *carrying* a crystal?"

"Oh. My. Frogs. You mean Solana's spellcasting focus."

"Hell yeah I do!"

At this, Sasha gives Anne a high five. "Never had any doubt about you, Boonchuy."

Marcy contemplates for a moment. "If Solana fails this saving throw, her crystal will shatter and she will be left unable to cast spells with material components."

Anne and Sasha watch the D20 roll on the dice tray, crossing their fingers.

"Natural 20. She'll still take half damage, but I'm sorry—"

"Silvery. Fucking. Barbs. Reroll." It's a rare moment when Anne swears, but her eyes are narrowed in determination, and she's fixated on breaking that damned spellcaster's crystal.

The dice rolls.

Marcy looks up. "A 14 wouldn't make it, would it?"

Anne shakes her head.

"Holy everloving frog, you have *no* idea what you've just done, Anna Banana!" Marcy's eyes shine. "Okay, so—"

As Solana presses her hands against her ears in an attempt to block out the noise, she pays little regard to her spellcasting focus encased in her chest plate. But when it shatters, it doesn't just fragment into shards of crystal. It erupts into light, in three shades. The first, a blue like Amara's own magic. The second, a green like Mazariah's. The third, a pink like Brünnhilde's glowing bracers. A scream, so different from Amara's, makes its way out of Solana's mouth, and as the light branches out away from the crystal, Solana's very body seems to fade, until all that's left is the memories of what once was there. The light becomes so bright both Amara and Mazariah shield their gaze, and Brünnhilde can make it out from way down below. When it dulls, in its place is an elven woman with curly black hair tied into elegant buns, wearing a dress that seems to be made from a nebula itself.

Amara gasps, and the two magic-users quickly start kneeling at the sight of the long-lost Goddess of the Stars.

"There is no need for that, my brave adventurers. Stand up, tall. Ah—let me fetch your companion for you, of course." With a waving of the goddess' hands, a whirling mess of stars swirls around next to Amara, and suddenly Brünnhilde is there, looking very confused.

"Um. What. Huh."

"Brünnhilde Bloodstrider, the last of the lost clan of Freya-kin, who fights with her clan despite their loss, who honours all that battle with her. You will have your resting place beyond the stars, dear warrior, and for the time being—I have enchanted your swords, so that they may work well against foes with magical resistance, and that they deal a little extra kick." The goddess winks, and Brünnhilde stares.

"Thank you, my lady—?"

She turns to Mazariah. "Mazariah, of the Eladrin, wanderer from the Feywild with a mind so fickle yet knowledgeable. Let me lend you some resilience, so that you may not be so easily enchanted by another, and will not lead your friends astray again."

Mazariah bows, a tear falling down their cheek. "That's—all I've ever wanted."

The goddess nods, and turns to the final member of the party.

"Amara. Born to wood elven parents, yet blessed by a divinity to become an aasimar with heavenly powers. Fate has never allowed you to choose a life of adventure, but it has burdened you with the idea that you must fight, must use the blessing you were born with that so many others were not. None here would judge you for deciding this was the end, that defeating Solana was your final battle. But, my dear, I offer you a choice, now. I have been stuck in that crystal for eons, forced to power the needs of any magic-user that wielded it. You set me free. And, I have always wanted a champion, you see. There is no one I would rather have than you—but if that is not the life for you, I understand. I will thank

*you in some other way, and know that the favour of a goddess is not one to take lightly. So tell me, Amara. What is **your** choice?"*

Amara glances at Mazariah, and her gaze lingers on Brünnhilde, who gives her a rare smile. Then, she takes a deep breath and stares into the black hole eyes of the goddess. "I accept. I wish to fight alongside my friends. I would be honoured to be your champion."

"And with that, all of us get a level-up! Anne, yours is in paladin. Sasha, your swords are now magical and deal an additional 1d8 radiant damage. And Mazariah got the Resilient feat in Wisdom!" Marcy grins. "I think that's the end of the session, unless either of you had any plans—?"

"Actually, I did!" Anne pipes up. "But first, holy frogs Marce, that was *incredible*. I've never felt cooler. You really know how to satisfy a character arc. Also, hello? Solana having the Goddess of the Stars trapped in her spellcasting focus this whole time? Who woulda thunk."

"Yeah! Like, damn. That was so much fun." Sasha agrees.

Marcy contemplates melting onto the floor. "Aaaaaa, thank you guys—I'm so grateful to have you as players, you learned so quickly and I'm so proud of both of you."

"Okay, the thing I had planned doesn't involve Marcy's characters, so let's let her die in peace while I—"

When the goddess leaves them, Amara turns to Brünnhilde.

"Hey, um, so. When you fell—"

"—sorry about that—"

"—If Maz hadn't saved you, I would've jumped right after you. I actually felt like my heart stopped beating. And I realized. This isn't just the enormous amount of love I feel for you two as friends. There was this thought in my mind and—I need to tell you, in case I never get the chance again. I'm in love with you, Brünnhilde."

"...Oh."

"I think I always have been. You—your whole clan was killed, and it'd have been so easy to give up. Anyone would've done it. But you're not anyone. Through everything, you keep fighting, no matter what. And, I'll be honest, you look—really, really hot when doing it. You've inspired me in ways I thought no one could. You're the reason I chose to continue adventuring, so that I could someday be as brave as you."

"Amara..."

"It's okay if you don't feel the same way. I'm sorry to—"

Brünnhilde cuts her off with a kiss, and Amara kisses her back.

"How are you feeling, Liv?"

The woman looked…rather unwell. She had a paler complexion than usual and was still squinting at the light of day. She groaned. "Not excellent."

Yunan massaged her shoulders in an effort to help her feel better. An ineffective counterattack, but Yunan felt it worth it to at least try. "Oh. One of *those* mornings?"

"It's not dire. But I've definitely been better."

"Would some tea help? Something light?" The two were staying in the spare room of Felicia Sundew's home and shop. Tea was less a possibility so much as an inevitability.

Olivia nodded weakly. "Yes, please. Perhaps rooibos—I don't think I'm allowed anything caffeinated. Maybe. I'll have to do more reading."

"I got you." Yunan kissed her forehead then hopped up and out the door. She returned some minutes later and sat down on the edge of the bed next to her fiancee, who had taken the opportunity to obtain a monopoly on all the blankets.

"I should've known," said Olivia, rubbing her head. "My mother said she was dreadfully ill for four months straight. We're just frail by nature."

"I wouldn't say that. You're tougher than you give yourself credit for."

The two savored the moment together. Outside through the open window they could feel the breeze and bustle of the summer morning. A bird chirped.

The ex-royal advisor broke the silence. "You were thinking about going out, weren't you?"

"Well, yeah, but coincidentally I am rather fond of you. If you're staying, I'm staying."

Olivia tried to sit up, but immediately went woozy and slumped right back into her blanket pile. "Ugh. I don't think the vertical cares for me right now."

"I'll stay then."

"It's perfectly fine, Yunnie. You can go out if you want to, it's a nice day. I'll be up later."

"Are you sure? I don't want to just leave you."

"I won't shatter. I wanted to get some reading in anyway."

"And by reading you mean…"

Olivia looked over at a little sheaf of papers in a folder that she'd tossed on the nightstand. "Fine, I want to figure out who to award those construction contracts to. Better to get rebuilding sooner rather than later."

"You're on vacation, don't add to your stress—" She stopped short. The two turned a little at the sound of a knock at the open doorframe.

Felicia appeared with the morning tea. She placed the tray on the side table and set about pouring two cups. "Are you feeling alright, Lady Olivia?"

The newt answered from her little blanket cocoon. "Yes, miss, just—tired. Nauseous."

"Was it something you ate, dear? I should have some specialized blends that can help with that, I can fetch them—"

"N-no! Sorry, er, not like that, it's…" She glanced to Yunan, then back to the frog. "It's, well, to be expected."

"What? Oh." Felicia had a moment of recognition. "*Oh!* Then congratulations, you two!" Both of the newts blushed. Yunan grinned and tousled Olivia's hair, which elicited a smile. Felicia, too, smiled, but then she had the presence of mind to shut the door most of the way to foil any potential eavesdroppers. Namely Ivy, who was still in her room working on a slingshot for Sprig. "That's quite exciting. But would you like me to keep quiet?"

"For now. At least for a little while," said Olivia. "It's still new to us."

"I understand. It's a big change."

"Certainly. And I'll give Yunan credit, it was an ingenious way to get me to quit drinking."

Yunan nearly spit out the sip of tea she was taking but managed to hastily swallow most of it before descending into a fit of laughter. A solitary bead of liquid dribbled down her chin, which caused her fiancee in turn to start giggling. A set of small, quick footsteps came from beyond the door and Ivy poked her head in. "Hey! What's so funny?"

The ex-general wiped away the tea droplet. "Nothing. Nothin' at all."

"It's like ten and you're still in bed. Lazybones~," the frog girl hummed. "Oh, mom, I finished the slingshot! Don't worry, I'll do the testing outside."

"I'd prefer it that way," Felicia smiled. "Would you mind running downstairs and grabbing a small pot of ginger tea? Lady Olivia is feeling a little ill."

"On it!" She hurried out. Yunan picked up the endearing little *thiwp-thwip-thwip* of her dashing down the stairs.

About twenty minutes later, Ivy was leading Yunan by the hand out into the streets of Wartwood. The pink newt was happy to chat as they walked. "So whatcha got going on with the slingshot there?"

"It's for my boyfriend, Sprig. Maybe to some people it's weird that we keep gifting each other stuff like that, but he likes 'em, and I like to make 'em."

"Oh no no, that's not weird. I'm one of the few who understands how the quickest way to a person's heart is with copious weaponry. Wait—actually, you could interpret that a number of different ways. My point stands."

"Let me guess, is that how Olivia proposed?"

"By stabbing me in the chest? No, but I'd be into it." Ivy giggled. Yunan gestured to the little pendant she wore as a necklace. "If you want to know, she proposed with this. It's a Newtopian thing."

"A rare positive example. Most of the Newtopian things I've been exposed to involved them trying to kill me."

"Yeah, apologies for that."

Ivy beamed and clenched a triumphant fist. "Oh, no, I was into it!"

The newt chuckled. Then, as they passed by the Grub and Go, a short frog in a conical hat noticed the visitor and gave her a side-eye and a hearty *harrumph*. Yunan sneered. "What's *his* problem?"

"Oh, you haven't seen the sign, have you? Frogs around here can be a little …" Ivy waggled her hand awkwardly, "slow to warm up to new folks."

"What? Like they wouldn't love the SCOURGE OF THE SAND WARS? *DEFEATER OF RAGNAR THE WRETCHED?*"

A few more frogs across the square glared and whispered amongst themselves. Yunan's companion tugged at her sleeve. "Maaaaaybe we should keep walking."

"Maybe they'll think again if they remember that I HELPED FIGHT ANDRIAS TOO YA KNOW," the newt yelled as Ivy yanked her along. Her heels dragged in the dirt, but the girl was surprisingly strong and got her around the corner without too much trouble.

Ivy let go. "Sorry. I think they're a little on edge. Not that they're not always paranoid about outsiders, but there's been some rumors of a squad of old frobots that didn't get the recall signal lurking out in the woods somewhere. Brings back bad memories for them."

"Of 'Newtopian things.'"

"Yup. Precisely." The girl bit her lip and nodded.

"Unlesssssss~ …"

The frog raised an eyebrow suspiciously.

"… Someone were to 'do something' about those bots? Some very dashing rescuer? Some very dashing rescuer that they'd have no choice but to like and accept afterwards for heroic services to the town?" Yunan touched the tips of her pointer fingers together.

"Marcy already tried something like that last year and accidentally sank half the town into the swamp."

"So what I'm hearing is, there's nowhere to go but up."

"Not the lesson I'd take from that but yeah, sure, screw it, I'm game."

"I think we're getting close. Watch for disturbed brush, scuff marks, things like that. Tracking a person can be hard but these things aren't exactly subtle."

Yunan halted behind a tree, gesturing the others back as she did so. Her and Ivy had needed to deliver the slingshot—and raid the old Plantar weapons stash—so it was only natural to have Sprig and Polly tagging along with them. The former to support his girlfriend, the latter to learn how to more effectively channel her infinite bloodlust.

The kids watched as the ex-general took a shallow breath, went still, and closed her eyes. The forest seemed to swallow her up as she did so; the sound of rustling leaves and the tapping of little insects' legs on logs washed over Yunan until they dissipated like ripples on a pond. Shallow breath out. A slow pattern emerged, cyclical rustling in the distance that repeated far too regularly to be natural. Servomotors in pairs—bipedal, one, two, was that four? Three perhaps? Something on that order, and only about a thousand yards away.

Sprig cocked his head to the side and whispered to Ivy. "This isn't a technique I've seen before."

"What do you usually do?"

"The Plantar way is to start by licking the dirt. It's traditional! Actually, remind me to teach you the dance—wait, no, these are frobots we're hunting, I don't think that'd really work. Hm."

"It's been over a year and I still underestimate how weird your family is."

Sprig nodded. “That’s entirely justified.”

“I know where you live,” interjected Polly.

Yunan raised herself just slightly from her crouch. “Hang tight and quiet. I’m taking point.” The three frogs nodded and fell in behind her, weaving under ferns and branches to minimize noise. The most anyone heard was the occasional twig and the quiet swishing of Yunan’s tail as it brushed over grass.

Within a few minutes, the four of them came to a chunk of rock large enough for cover. The sounds of servomotors was louder now. In front of them lay a wide gully bridged by a fallen tree now sprouting mushrooms. And, below, three frobots patrolling back and forth. Their footsteps intermittently splashed in shallow water.

“Alright. Stay back, I don’t want any of you in harm’s way.” The woman unsheathed two shortswords, one in each hand, a form the Newtopians called *dimachaerus*. “Watch and learn.” Big smile.

Yunan kept her body low as she vaulted over the rock and advanced. The best plan of attack, she figured, would be to get over the gully and come from the other side—the bots didn’t have the best visual processing over their heads, as the newt remembered from her rescue attempt in the castle. She would have enough time to cross the log and pull their arc of fire away from the frog kids. They were pretty adorable, she had to admit. Now she came to the log. The end was crumbling into those little angular chunks that Marcy had once described as “cubical butt rot.” Yunan smirked at the memory. The wood underfoot felt damp and a little cold and she focused on staying low and fast, balanced down the center–

C-CK-CCRRRRAACK.

Well shit.

The log suddenly gave way and the newt found herself plunging through the air. She had little time to appreciate this fact before an impact with something hard and metallic took the wind out of her. Her side hurt like hell. She heard something buzzing. Yunan wrenched her eyes open.

There was a metallic leg just before her.

The ex-general rolled on pure instinct and the frobot’s shot sparked off the pebbles. She pushed against the ground, hands empty now, and rose to her feet. Where were her swords? No time—she dodged, and a second shot whizzed past her head. There! On the ground, a long shiny thing, wavering but in focus just enough for her to scoop up as she flung herself past. Judging by the amount of fire there were two frobots on her now. The third lay ahead, leveling its weapon, charging, too slow as Yunan slid between its legs and let it take the blasts intended for her. She ducked behind its smoking wreck for a moment’s cover. Could she get a second? She’d soon find out—instead of letting them corner her, the newt charged back out, swordpoint poised for the killing blow. Before it connected, a mechanical claw clenched around her tail and swung her into the gully’s wall.

Here she was again. At least it was her shoulder that seemed to take the brunt of it this time. She’d get far worse if she didn’t move, and soon, but her body wasn’t responding. More buzzing. Ah hell. Eyes open. Both remaining frobots, but before they could take the shot–

“**AMBUSH!**”

The new threats forced them to recalibrate. It was enough to spare Yunan, who watched as an expertly-aimed slingshot pellet from Sprig smashed straight through the glass eyepiece of one frobot and detonated its cortical processor in a shower of sparks. The other staggered back in retreat while Ivy overwhelmed it with a series of quick blows. The small frog got in underneath and delivered a leg sweep that toppled the automaton backwards, helpless.

“I’ve always wanted to do this,” giggled Polly in an evil voice. With far less precision than her brother, she raised the spiked flail she was carrying and brought it down hard.

“The kids say you took a bit of a beating out there, are you sure you’re alright? I got some ye-olde medicinal remedies that’ll fix you right up. That shoulder of yours has got to bruise–“

“No, I’ll be fine~,” Yunan reassured Hop Pop. She was sitting on the edge of the Plantar home’s back dock, worried that going inside would mean someone would shove a blanket and tea on her or something. “I’ve had broken bones, spear hits to the head, even a whiff of phosgene from knocking out a barbariant colony.

Some scratches aren't gonna kill me at this rate. And that creepy one says I don't have a concussion, so that's nice." She put on a brave face but the old frog could tell she was wavering.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, there's not much you can do, nothing's bleeding. Good enough for government work." The edge of her voice broke unconvincingly, enough that she could tell that the old frog wouldn't accept her answer.

She sighed.

"Look…don't tell anyone I said this. A-NY-ONE. But I'm…actually kinda bad at most things," Yunan confessed softly.

The frog took a seat beside her. "In what way?"

"I don't know! I just—" She gestured, hands shaking before her. "I'm supposed to be this badass, and yeah I'm good at that, but beyond hacking the shit out of stuff I don't know what I'm doing! At all! And even now, like, today, I'm not even doing *that* right anymore! I want to take care of folks, protect them, be a good girlfriend—or, wife, mom, but—" She froze, realizing what she'd let slip.

Hop Pop coughed. "I'm guessing I should zip it about that?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Zipped." The elderly frog pulled an imaginary drawstring across his lips.

"*Anyway,*" continued Yunan, now an embarrassed red. She hunched forward and dropped to a lower register. "There…there have been times before when I've failed. Won the war and got the parade, sure, but as much as I've tried—someone always gets hurt. Liv, Marcy, Olivia again. Not to mention I spent two decades working for a tyrant without even noticing." She sighed. "Things are different now. But I'm scared it'll all happen again."

"You sound stressed."

"Yeah, no shit buddy—"

"But that's ok." Yunan raised an eyebrow. "No, really. *Anyone* would be with all that's going on. But it's because you care."

The newt remained silent, an invitation to continue.

"Things hurt," said Hop Pop. "You'll do your best but there will always be bruises, and that's the price. It hurts because you love. Even the perfect can't stop that, and nobody's even close."

"But—I want to protect them, do better—"

"And you are. It's a lesson I had to learn myself, but you can't obsess. Part of protection is letting the light in, letting them thrive. Tell me, what were you doing this morning?"

"I…well, she woke up sick, I went to get her tea, we were talking about the day, Felicia appeared, Liv almost made me squirt tea out of my snout laughing…" She smiled. A memory like the sun on her face, another for the cabinet of thousands she flicked through at night. Olivia, hair short and gamine, smiling with the box outside the old general's house fifteen years prior. The sandwich in the garden, ears still ringing, perfume cutting through fading gunpowder as she nestled into her shoulder. The human girl lifted from the tank. A temporary triumph. The aftermath of the last battle, an embrace scented with seashore and ruin.

The old frog hummed. "Then it sounds like you're already doing a great job. Things change and you change with it, even if you don't realize it at first. Everything flows."

"Hm. Maybe it does." She leaned back, quietly taking in the view of the algae-sheened lake before her. A moment of peace.

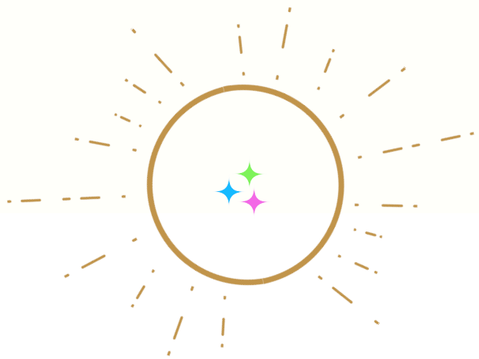
A soft, proper cough came from behind them. "I do hope I'm not interrupting. Have you had some adventures?"

"Oh! Liv! Feeling better?" Hop Pop noticed how Yunan lit up as she turned.

"Well enough for breakfast. And I figured you were right about not working on vacation." Olivia smiled. Instead of the folder she had a novel tucked under her arm. "Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all," the pink newt replied.

Hop Pop stood from the dock. “You can take my spot, madam. I have some errands to run anyway.” The old frog went for the door, but before it closed Yunan looked back in time to see him nod.



mod team

writing mods

blair || they/them
- @banyanas
- @nosferatank
- @nosferatank

ludo || she/her
- @clacing
- @catchradora
- @nuttyshake

nyx || xe/they
- @kaseyskat
- @kaseyskat
- @kaseyskat

art mods

oly || he/they
- @mithrilduck
- @curseoftheduck
- @mithrilduck

ivy || she/her
- @ivypond11
- @ivypond11
- @ivypond

formatting mod

joanie || she/they
- @bardicspiration
- @ruminescing
- @fictitiousregrets

Thank you to all our **contributors!**

cover artists

oly is also one of our guest artists and a mod of the zine!

see his work starting on *page 84* ☆

kami is also one of our zine's artists!

see her work starting on *page 22* ☆

a lesson in herpetology

pages 1-9

writer

eight
(she/they/he)
eightpoundsofhair
eightpoundshair
eightpoundsofhair

artist

foxbloggr
(he/him)
foxbloggr
foxbloggr
foxbloggr

the girl, the cat and the black hole calamity

pages 10-21

writer

bee
(they/she/he)
mell0bee
mell0bee

artist

mao
(she/her)
maodoodle
maodoodles
maodoodle

i miss you, i'm sorry

pages 22-29

writer

clo
(they/she)
sashanngst
bewitchedbyclo

artist

kami
(she/her)
goodartitude
goodartitude

a light for dead men

pages 30-45

writer

blair
(they/them)
banyanas
nosferatank
nosferatank

artist

jackdaw
jackdawsscrapbook

arcadi
(they/them)
arcadiii
arcadiwrites
arcadi

darling running ain't enough
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(they/them)
insulationsun
clausilly

i promise, as soon as the war ends, i'll find you
(and we'll break laws again)
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marcylore
marcylore
jadedharley

fridge
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yohannahgoldkamp
artfridge99
yohannahgoldkamp

baby, you got me falling (but not in a good way)
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glace
(she/her)
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glace_cakes
glacecakes

cc falco (peebs)
(she/her)
peebsz
peebszzz
peebszzz

fae
(any pronouns)
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kfaeries
kfaerie

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themissakat
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curseoftheduck
mithrilduck

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catchradora
nuttyshake

starry
(they/them)
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starryemeralds
starryemeraldsart

a tale of divinity and daring
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rana
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thelostillustrator
nymphofbooks

mood-owl
(he/they)
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moodtheowl
moodtheowl

newtdemiurge
(she/her)
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newtdemiurge
newtdemiurge

wartwood weekend
pages 115-125

nah
(she/her)
t *bananahkim*